

ACTION-PACKED **WESTERN**

JAN. 1955

**2 THRILLING
NOVELS**

**DEATH RIDES
MY SADDLE**

by Ed Earl Repp

GOLDEN CIRCLE

by Roe Richmond

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STORIES
NEW**



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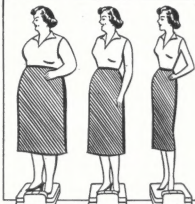
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★ **ACTION-PACKED** ★ **WESTERN**

VOL. I

JANUARY, 1955

NO. 4

Two Powerful Novels

DEATH RIDES MY SADDLE

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There were seven links in the chain, seven people who saw the gold and in the devil's time, got their hands on it — seven doomed...



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ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

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The ABC's of
SERVICING





Suddenly old Cy Crosby was dead, killed because young Les' fear held him paralyzed in a crisis. And the Broken Spur crew wouldn't put themselves out to save a coward's holdings.

DEATH RIDES MY SADDLE

NOVEL OF GUNSMOKE RIVALRY

by Ed Earl Repp



THE RUMBLE of fast-approaching hoof-thunder caused Les Crosby's heart to dip sickeningly. Broken Spur round-up hands were hazing in that band of wild mustangs an hour ahead of schedule—pouring them into the spreading jaws of a mighty horse trap. It was an avalanche of scared, untamed, man-hating animals. Les yelled at his father.

"Dad!" he called hoarsely to the deaf oldster working on the corral stringers. Les knew that old Cy Crosby couldn't hear him, but he yelled again: "Dad! Get out of there—fast!"

Waiting on the trail, Les' blocky

shoulders sagged beneath dirty denims clothing his sweaty body. Old Cy kept on working, oblivious to the hovering wings of death beating over him. Les stared up the rocky draw, uncertainty and desperation clouding his gray eyes. His gloved hand fumbled at the coiled rope tied to his saddle.

His moment of indecision quickly passed. Les clenched his teeth until the muscles along his lean, dark jaws stood out in cords. He'd face those fast-moving horses. This was the test. "Gawd!" he choked. "I can't let them run over him."

He lunged forward, and then the avalanche of horseflesh rolled around a turn and piled into the steep-walled gut. His courage fell from him like a cloak and his muscles turned to water. That old fear still claimed him, Les

thought bitterly, as he let his boogered mount turn tail to the plunging mass of mustangs. He grabbed the saddle nubbin and hung on. The thundering tide swept him along. Again he bawled at his father, knowing it was a waste of breath. Fifty yards below, the gut opened into the stout corral; old Cy's back was facing certain death.

Then Les' pony stumbled, lost its smooth stride and plunged to the ground under a maelstrom of flying hooves. Les managed to free his boots of stirrups, yet he lay pinned beneath the frightened, kicking gelding. Dust boiled thick in his face, bringing tears to his eyes, making him gasp for breath. Over and around him flowed a steady stream of horses. He clung tightly to his mount's neck.

A flying hoof caught him a glancing blow on the back of his head, sending his face deeper into his pony's mane. Then suddenly it was over; the last of the fuzztails entered the trap. Dazed and shaken, Les worked his leg from beneath his dying mount. He'd suffered bruises and a good egg on his head, nothing more. He rocked to his feet and stumbled forward.

The mustangs were packed tight in the corral now, milling and fighting at the stout poles and stringers. But they were shying from one spot at the end of the wall. Les knew why.

That bloody, smashed pulp of a man was all that remained of old Cy Crosby.

The three Broken Spur horse wranglers, that trailed the herd into the trap, found Crosby staring glumly into the corral. Sensing trouble, they slid out of saddles and gathered about him.

Stud Moonan, old Cy's ramrod, turned pale under his black stubble of whiskers. "My Gawd, kid!" he said huskily. "What made you do it? If you couldn't hold 'em, at least you could've warned him—"

Crosby put his back to the poles, breathing hard, trying to hide his grief. "Why blame me? What about yourself,

Moonan? You brought these bronses in early; you stampeded them so they couldn't be stopped!"

Moonan jerked back the brim of his dusty, battered range hat. Anger glinted in his jet eyes. "Your job was holding 'em!" he snapped. "You trying to slide out of that?"

Crosby took one step toward his long, lean tormentor. Then fear stopped him; he dared not fight the big ramrod. A reflex pattern of seven years' duration still held him in its merciless grip.

Tex and Randy, the other two hands, stared sickly at Crosby as if they could read his mind. "Stud's right," muttered lanky Tex Ramsay. "I reckon we all know it."

An angry protest sprang to Crosby's lips. He watched the three punchers through smoky eyes, reading the unspoken accusation in their grim, sun-blackened faces. It cut deep inside him. They had him tagged. He *could* have warned his father in time.

Randy Allen's pale lips trembled. Randy wasn't over twenty, a slim, blond kid with boyish, freckled features. Death touched him hard. "The Old Man d-dead," he stammered. "That means Broken Spur belongs to you, Les; you're our new boss."

Stud Moonan's thin lips twisted into a hard grin. "He's *Mister* Crosby now, boys. Mebbe I'd of let them bronses get past me; too—if I'd been watching back there." His eyes glowed meaningly. "It was worth it."

The blood drained from Crosby's face, leaving it white and tense. His eyes blazed with anger. "You're saying I killed Dad—on purpose; I won't forget it, Moonan. Right now, we got no time for fussing. You know the spot Broken Spur is in. We'll carry on just like Dad would want us to do. You take over while I pack what's left of him into town. We're going to beat Diamond F to that Army contract, come hell or high water!"

The big ramrod laughed uneasily.

"Forget what I said, kid. I was talking out of turn."

"Reckon that ends the argument," Tex Ramsay grunted. "Lend me a hand and we'll snake the Old Man out of the pen."

A FEW MINUTES later, Crosby had stripped his saddle gear from the dead gelding. Riding a star-faced buckskin from his private string and leading his father's favorite saddler, he headed for Red Rock town. For the last time, old Cy was making that ride, too.

Stud Moonan and Randy Allen stayed behind. Tex Ramsay rode with his new boss. Few words passed between them over the hot, dusty miles. Cy Crosby's tragic death had brought the Broken Spur to a grim and unpredictable perch over a road that led to ruin. And it was up to the fighting oldster's son to save his newly-inherited ranch.

A chip off the old block might be able to do it. Crosby knew what his punchers were thinking. Blunt-spoken old Cy had once put it into searing words: "Yella, by Gawd!" he'd bit out, whiskered jaw working angrily, shaggy brows pulled down over faded blue eyes, piercing as a knife. "You couldn't lick your weight in spit! Ain't a man in this part of New Mexico but what would give half his life for your build. You got the makin's of a real he-man, except for one thing—guts!" The temper that rode the old man had glowed unhidden in his craggy face. "By hell, I wish I had a son to be proud of!"

Everybody had shared old Cy's opinion, although they were polite enough to keep their mouths shut around the oldster and his strapping son. Les had seen the mingled pity and contempt in their eyes; he knew that his father's friends shunned him like a leper. And knowing that this treatment was no fault of his own, Les had gone out of his way to avoid human companionship. The virus of that isolation had done its deadly work over the years.

Time did not treat Broken Spur kindly either. Old Cy had spent a lifetime in building his wilderness domain into the greatest horse ranch in the West; then Matt Furness and his two sons had located south of Broken Spur. Their Diamond F spread encompassed flat rangeland along the Mexican border and the rugged mountain slopes north which old Cy claimed by prior usage. Loyal to their boss and resentful of the upstart intruders, the Broken Spur hands started riding with hands on ready guns; they shot first and asked questions later.

Diamond F adopted the same policy. Men died or disappeared in those remote crags and canyons, and their demise was never reported to the law. An armed truce existed whenever Broken Spur or Diamond F met in town; the hidden feud was common knowledge to everybody. The big question mark was when it would erupt openly into a blazing, murderous battle that would see the end of one of the two big outfits.

No one, except old Cy and his son, knew the desperate plight in which Broken Spur found itself this summer. Bands of wild horses had disappeared from their customary hideouts in the hills—bands from which Broken Spur depended on new stock to supply distant buyers. Several hundred head of broken horses, that had been pastured all winter, had vanished. Paying gunwages and keeping a string of first class fighting men on the payroll had whittled Cy Crosby's dwindling bank account alarmingly. He'd been forced to cut his roster of gunhands in half through the winter months.

The oldster had sworn that Matt Furness was behind the rustling; he'd promised to even the score. But first, came the all-important Army contract which was tossed between Broken Spur and Diamond F each year. Forty thousand dollars for four hundred three-year-old mustangs!

Diamond F had walked off with the Army's check for the past two years; if they repeated this year, old Cy was finished.

It didn't matter much now, Les Crosby thought gloomily. His father would never face the humiliation of losing another Army contract. He'd never feel the final agony of watching Broken Spur break up before his very eyes. It would be Les' lot to go through all that.

He wasn't trying to kid himself. In his hands, the ranch was doomed. Those rough, tough horse-wranglers, that old Cy had been so proud of, would not work for a coward; they'd never take orders from Les Crosby.

SMOKY DUSK rolled down out of the gloomy foothills as the two riders jogged down Red Rock's main drag.

Lights were winking on in the false-fronts lining both sides of the dusty street; a chilly breeze riffled through the cottonwoods, flapping the colored bunting that hung over the roadway. Everywhere, against store fronts and board fences, big placards advertised the annual one-day rodeo of next week.

The excitement that held Red Rock in its grip brought a bitter taste into Crosby's mouth.

A group of loafers on the benches under the *Golden Chance* overhang stared curiously as the three Broken Spur horses trotted past. Crosby recognized Matt Furness' three-hundred-pound bulk among them.

Tex Ramsay reined into the side street leading to the calaboose. "I'll find the sheriff," he said. "We'll see you at the doc's office."

Doc Randall was eating supper in a cafe across the street from his musty office when Crosby stopped there. Combining the care of the sick with the burying of the dead, the little medico made a lucrative living from Red Rock town and its wide-flung trade. He came hurrying across the road, his flat-heeled shoes kicking up little spurts of

dry dust behind him. "What's this?" he asked, squinting through thick lensed glasses. "Les Crosby! Who you packing on that horse?"

"It's Dad," Crosby said softly. "Lend a hand, Doc. Pat Keefe will be here in a minute."

They had old Cy on a table in one of the back rooms when Tex and Sheriff Keefe hurried in. The news of Cy's death spread quickly. Soon the office was jammed with silent, awkward men, hats in calloused hands, come to pay their last respects to an old friend.

Crosby's somber voice sounded loud in the hushed funeral parlor. "He was puttering around in our horse trap up in Squaw Canyon, Pat. A band of wild mustangs we were gathering, stampeded and caught him; he didn't have a chance."

Keefe was a slim six-footer, built like a buggy whip, with bulldog jaws and cold blue eyes. Now there was a suspicious moisture in those eyes. "A better man never sat a saddle," he said gruffly, clearing his voice. "Red Rock will miss him. How-come all you hoss wranglers let him get run down that-a-way?"

The color faded from Les Crosby's face. He stared helplessly at Tex Ramsay. That sober-faced bronc-topper stood there, looking stonily down at his dusty boots.

"My job was holding them," Crosby said heavily. "I let those wild devils get past; nobody else was to blame."

Except for the slow, austere breathing of the crowd, the room was silent as a tomb. "I reckon that's all I got to say," Crosby muttered, averting his eyes. "If you want me, Pat, I'll stick around town tonight."

Keefe said, "Do that, mister. I'll see you later."

Crosby turned to the little medico. "About the burial, Doc? Can you wait till Sunday? All the boys at the ranch will want to be here. We can't drop our roundup now—not when we're racing

Diamond F for the Army contract."

"That's exactly what Cy would want," agreed Randall. "Sunday it is."

AFTER EVERYBODY had filed out of the room, Crosby dropped into a chair. "Doc," he began hesitantly, "I guess you knew Dad better than any man in these parts. If he ever wanted advice, he came to you. Did he ever ask you anything about me?"

"He did." Randall pulled a chair up beside Crosby. "There wasn't anything Cy wouldn't do for you. It soured him plenty when he thought you'd lost your courage. He hoped I could straighten you out, Les. I kept your confidence that day; I didn't tell him that a kid with a rifle slug pressing against his spine was liable to take things mighty easy until that slug was removed."

Crosby said bitterly, "I was scared of dying when it happened—and shaking in my boots at the thought of Dad finding it out. You know what he'd have done, Doc—grabbed a gun and rode to Diamond F headquarters, looking for the Furnesses. He wouldn't have had a chance."

"No," Randall agreed, "you saved his life; I always admired you for smart thinking that day. You came to me half dead, begging me not to tell Cy about it. Since you were away on a hunting trip, I was able to keep you in my home until I pulled you out of it. If I'd told Cy that one of the Furness boys drygulched you, all hell would have boiled over. That's why I kept my mouth shut, Les."

"Maybe I should have died." Crosby's voice was moody. His brooding eyes stared levelly at the little medico. "For seven years I've carried that bullet, afraid that any sudden jolt would be my last, praying for the day when it was gone and I could call myself a man again. It's taken a lot out of me, Doc. The pain stayed with me all the time, sapping my strength and paralyzing my muscles. I couldn't tell any-

body, not even you; I didn't dare let anybody even guess that I was sick. That was worse than the pain. Knowing that they called me a coward—seeing it in their eyes—taking their jibes and insults.

"But hurting Dad was the worst part. I was all he had left after Mom died. We were so close un-until this happened. I had to watch him go to pieces and I couldn't stop it."

Doc Randall said gruffly, "You did what was best, son; there wasn't any other way."

Resting his folded arms on his knees, Crosby leaned forward and wearily said, "The pain left me about three months ago. The bullet's shifted; I can feel it under my skin. My strength came back, but my courage didn't. I-I've tried to do the things a man ought to do. It's no good, Doc; I-I'm what Dad called me: a coward!"

Randall placed a gentle hand on Crosby's slumped shoulder. "You should've come to me sooner," he scolded softly. "There's nothing wrong with you, son; nothing that can't be cured. The professional name for it is necrophobia. It means fear of death, and you've lived with it a long time. Every time you make a decision that fear guides your actions. Once you do something that shows you there's nothing to fear any more, you'll cure fast."

"My advice is to go pick a fight with someone, or top a wild bronc and let him bust you several times. Whatever you do, go through with it; but first, let me have a look at that slug."

The little medico prodded the dark lump midway up Crosby's back. "Feel anything now?" he asked.

"No," answered Crosby.

"Peel off your shirt and crawl onto a table," ordered Randall. "I'm going to cut that bullet out. It isn't dangerous any more; this won't take more'n fifteen minutes."

TEX RAMSAY was waiting on the boardwalk outside the office. He

said, "I can use a drink and a bite of chow. How about you?"

"Yeah," answered Crosby, rubbing at the sticking plaster on his back. A couple of stitches had closed the incision. It was unbelievable that the bullet was gone, "Especially the drink."

They crossed the street to the *Golden Chance*, big spur rowels clanking noisily. They pushed through the batwings and lined up at the half-empty bar; a bartender took their order.

Crosby reached for his glass. That was when the folded scrap of paper was tossed on the mahogany before him.

Matt Furness had eased his great bulk up to the bar beside him. A cropped, salt-and-pepper beard covered most of his broad face. His small, close-set eyes blazed like live coals under the beaver hat set precisely over his thick, gray hair. Big Matt always looked uncomfortable in his town suit, and the forced smile on his pockmarked face did not make him any prettier. Jube, his youngest son, stood beside him.

"Read it," the big man boomed in a voice that could be heard all over the barroom. "You'll be interested."

Crosby stared at the document, refusing to believe his eyes. Finally his lips straightened. He crumpled the paper in one hand as he turned to face Matt Furness.

The shaky handwriting, laboriously scrawled in ink, was that of old Cy Crosby. Les recognized it instantly.

It read: "*To whom it may concern: After a couple of bottles of tequila, me and Matt Furness are speaking to each other. He claims his outfit can lock mine at anything we lock horns over. Nobody but a damn fool would challenge Broken Spur. Here's my answer in writing: any time his outfit walks off with top money in the annual Red Rock rodeo, he can buy me out. An appraiser selected by the Association sets the price, and it's a cash sale. If Diamond F loses, the same rules apply and I buy them out. I'll honor this*

agreement any place and any time that Matt Furness feels like calling it."

The document bore the signatures of Cy Crosby and Matt Furness. Stud Moonan and Furness' oldest son Giff had signed as witnesses. The place was Juarez, Mexico, the time almost ten years ago.

"I aimed to call Cy's bluff," big Matt murmured, rolling the unlighted cigar between his teeth. "Now that he's dead, you'll have to carry out his obligation."

Crosby stared up into the unsmiling face. "Not on your say-so. I remember that Mexican trip of Dad's; he and Stud Moonan went down to dicker for some gentled horses. I'll check with Moonan and get his story."

"You doubt my word? You calling me a liar?" A mean look slid into the Diamond F owner's glittering eyes. "Whatever I had against Cy, he was all man; we respected each other's word. No sniveling coward can say that Matt Furness is pulling a fast one!"

Carefully folding the paper, Crosby slipped it into his shirt pocket. He wanted no trouble with big Matt tonight; he found the urge to leave the saloon almost overpowering. He wanted to sidestep this argument, just as he'd avoided trouble for the past seven years.

"No offense," he muttered, his face reddening at sound of a low snicker somewhere in the room behind him. "This comes sort of sudden. I'm not calling you anything, Furness. All I'm asking is a little time to see where Broken Spur stands. I-I'll back any deal that Dad made; he'd want it that way."

Big Matt's yellow teeth sank into the cigar now in the corner of his mouth. "That's what I wanted to hear," he snapped. "I've waited many a year for this. After the rodeo Monday, I'll own Broken Spur. Look me up, Crosby; maybe I'll be hiring."

Crosby tossed down his drink and turned to go. Shame held him in its

grip. His only thought was to get out of here, to blot out that circle of leering faces.

"Come on, Tex," he mumbled.

He did not see the covert signal that passed from Matt Furness to his hulking son, but he could not fail to feel Jube's bear-like hand upon his arm, spinning him around.

JUBE'S BULK ran to beef and muscle instead of fat like big Matt. No man on Red Rock range had ever seen him knocked off his big feet in a fight. A skimpy beard covered his chin; his shifty eyes glared a challenge as he towered over Les. "Don't try to slip out with that agreement, Crosby. We ain't trustin' you either; give it back!"

Crosby lifted his hand, intending to pull the slip of paper from his pocket. Too late, he realized Jube's intention. "No, you don't!" said the big fellow. "No yellerbelly pulls a sneak gun on me!"

He slapped Crosby with his open hand, sent him staggering back against the bar. Les felt the comforting support of the mahogany against his shoulders as he wagged his head, wondering if it had been torn off by that mighty blow. A cold fear numbed his insides. After all these years, he was in a fight!

With a roomful of spectators around him, big Jube was in his glory. Standing away from his helpless victim, he plastered both cheeks with more jolting slaps. Confused, fighting the blind panic that possessed him, Crosby stood on wide-spread legs and took punishment that would have sent most men to the floor.

A perplexed look slid across Jube's face when Crosby remained upright. He let his arms fall to his sides, assumed a bravado position and said, "Come on and fight, yellerbelly! You ain't hidin' behind old Cy's shirttail no longer!"

Jube had whipped many a man in the barroom, and it was his boast that

the hombre didn't live who could make him say uncle. But he was no coward and because of it the saloon audience was behind him to a man.

Crosby heard Jube's withering taunts through the din that rang in his burning ears; he heard the crowd's laughter, their outspoken encouragement to young Furness. Their faces mocked him through the haze that attacked his throbbing eyes.

Tex Ramsay's pleading words sliced through the tumult pounding at Crosby's brain. "Fight him, Les!" the redhead begged. "Fight him for Cy's sake! The Old Man'll never rest in his grave if you take this in public!"

Crosby felt his rubbery legs moving, carrying him forward. He didn't want to fight Jube; he was scared, he admitted when the panic lifted long enough for lucid thought. That bullet still pressed against his spine. Jube's bullet—fired from behind! The big bully had been scared of Les Crosby that day.

Now he heard Jube's heavy laughter. Sharp spur-rowels bit into Crosby's leg as the other man hooked a boot behind his knee. A dirty palm slammed hard against Crosby's chin, shoving him backward. He went to the sawdust floor like a roped steer. He sprawled there on his back, dazed, staring vacantly at the sea of faces about him. Then slowly he crawled to hands and knees. He stayed there, shaking his head, feeling anger stir and gather within him. A strange, pulsing anger that blotted out all thought except his desire to even his score with the laughing giant over him.

I'm not hurt, he was thinking. I took more punishment just now than I've taken in years. I was scared but I took it. Doc is right; I can cure myself, if I only go through this fight...

THOSE SPECTATORS saw something that made their eyes bug out that night. Crosby suddenly rose to his

feet. In doing so, his muscular arms had wound about Jube's thick legs. The giant towered helplessly in the air, pawing frantically with his hands to keep his balance. His raucous laughter choked off, was replaced by a bellow; he crashed to the floor with a thud that shook the entire saloon when Crosby tossed him on his head.

Jube came off the floor like a mad bull, piggish eyes blazing their fury, his loose lips mouthing curses. His chin was a wide open target. Crosby swung from his boot-tops, digging his heels into the floor for leverage. Seven years of hurt and shame and humiliation were packed into that blow. His fist met Jube coming up, landed on the point of that bearded chin with a sodden, meaty sound.

A startled look flashed over the giant's face, quickly faded. His huge hands pawed the air wildly and found no support. He seemed to come apart at the joints as the strength ran out of him. He went down like an axed steer.

Except for Crosby's heavy breathing, not a sound disturbed the interior of the *Golden Chance*. The onlookers stood frozen, refusing to believe their eyes.

Crosby said, "When Jube wakes up, tell him I'm keeping this agreement until I check on it. If he still wants it back, he can come out to Broken Spur and get it." His defiant gaze ran over the room, finally settled on big Matt. "That goes for you too, mister; got any arguments?"

Matt Furness stared blankly at his son's limp body, shifted his eyes to Crosby. "A Crosby *whipped* a Furness," he muttered. "If I hadn't seen it, I wouldn't believe it. Take that agreement with you, Crosby; I don't need it. You'll probably find another one somewhere in Cy's files. They's another copy with Pat Keefe. I covered all angles. I'm going to break you fast. First, the Army contract, then the rodeo; you'll come begging to me!"

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SERGEANT ED PALMER, Army horse buyer, joined Crosby and Tex Ramsay outside the saloon. Palmer was a lean, short man, smelling strongly of horse sweat and rank leather. His straight shoulders and erect bearing plainly showed his many years with the U. S. cavalry.

"Nice scrap," he said, shaking hands. He was a man of few words. "Saw it all. Young Furness asked for trouble; he got it. I heard about Cy. Damn shame. Hope you can carry on, Crosby."

Les Crosby thoughtfully rubbed the bruised knuckles of his right hand. "You mean the Army contract? Don't count us out; we're not licked. Our colts will be delivered this weekend."

"I hope so," said Palmer. "It hurts me to see a Furness take government money. Remember our terms," he warned. "Cash for the first horses delivered into the pens. Those are my orders—otherwise I'd buy from you direct."

"I'll remember." A vision of the Army man's pretty daughter rose to haunt Crosby; "give my regards to Miss Ann."

Palmer eyed him shrewdly. "You didn't see her? She rode out to Broken Spur yesterday; stayed overnight."

It came to Crosby with somewhat of a shock that he'd forgotten about Diana, his cousin. Stud Moonan or one of the hands would have ridden in and told her about old Cy by now. Les was glad that Ann Palmer was out there in the lonely old ranchhouse with the girl; she'd take the Old Man's death mighty hard. He'd always been a father to her, taking her in and raising

her after her folks were killed in an Indian raid.

"Dad gave strict orders," Crosby told Palmer. "No womenfolk ever rode the range during roundup. The girls stayed home; that's why I didn't see them." His blocky shoulders sagged wearily. "I'm glad they did—today."

Sheriff Keefe didn't show up at the hotel that night. Crosby finally went to bed, but sleep would not come; his run-in with the two Furnesses was vivid in his mind. The discovery that his fear had been largely mental seethed through him. Whipping big Jube brought a lot of satisfaction. Jube had fired the rifle that had made Les' life a living hell all these years.

They had been boys then. A black yearling colt had caused the trouble between them. Les spotted the colt trailing along behind its mammy as she ran with a wild bunch. He followed that band of horses all over the Devil's Mountain range before he managed to separate the black colt from the others. He had it roped and tied when Jube Furness rode up and claimed the colt. The colt wasn't branded, neither was its mammy. Plainly, Jube was lying; Les told him so and dared him to make something of it. Jube didn't want a fight that day. He rode away, mumbling his threats.

Les had taken the black colt home and put him to pasture with the rest of his little colt herd. He'd grown mighty fond of the little horse in the months that followed, and he got careless. Jube's bullet had taken him from a drygulch stakeout. The hulking lout had stood over Les and laughed, thinking him dead; somehow, Les had found his horse and made it to Doc Randall in town.

When the medico let him ride back to the ranch, the black colt had vanished from the pasture. Les never saw it again. He knew that Jube had stolen the animal yet he could do nothing about it. If his father heard that a

Furness had rustled a Broken Spur horse, there'd be hell to pay; and Les thought too much of old Cy to endanger his life by sending him against his sworn enemies.

Yet they had gotten him anyway, Crosby mused as he lay there in the hotel darkness. This thing was deep and well planned. His father's death had been no accident; Stud Moonan had deliberately put those wild mustangs into the trap ahead of time this morning. Old Cy's foreman had known his boss would be inside the corral working on the poles. Crosby was remembering a lot of little things now. Incidents that went unnoticed through the years, scraps of conversation that had held little meaning until now.

There was no doubt in his mind but that Moonan was working with the Furnesses, but obtaining proof of that would be difficult. It would be a miracle if the unholy alliance were ever uncovered.

Crosby finally drifted off to sleep on the thought.

LES AND Tex ate breakfast before dawn the next morning and rode back to the roundup camp. They found most of the crew idly awaiting orders from their new boss. The colts had been separated from the band caught in the trap in Squaw Canyon and driven down into the grassy valley pasture; the remainder of the wild herd had fled back into the hills.

"You knew what to do!" Crosby snapped, facing Stud Moonan. "Every minute counts. There'll be no more sleep for anybody until this job is done. Some of those colts wear our brand, some don't. Slap our iron on the clean ones; turn the others loose. Then head our gather toward the home corrals. Savvy?"

"Couldn't be plainer," drawled Moonan, turning his back on his boss.

As the afternoon wore along, Crosby sensed the antagonism of his crew. It was intangible and unspoken but it was

there, mocking and defying him. A barrier that he must remove if he ever hoped to control these men.

The Broken Spur hands—the bunch that old Cy had boasted could out-ride, out-rope, and out-fight anything put up against them—acted like a troop of boy scouts on a picnic. They built the branding fires too high, covering the frons in the flames. Their roping was sloppy, and after several throws they'd pull a struggling colt up to the fire—to find him already branded. Many a time they backed away from a thrown colt's churning hoofs, letting the scared animal scramble to his legs and race back into the herd.

It was their way of telling Les Crosby that he did not stack up as a boss. It was an open invitation to him to try and do something about it, if he dared. . .

Crosby watched it all, trying to keep a tight rein on his temper. The old indecision had its way with him; the familiar panic wrapped clammy fingers about his brain. He kept reminding himself that the bullet was gone from his back, that he was a man again. He'd proven that by whipping big Jube the night before. And gradually the fear disappeared.

By nightfall he was mad enough to tackle the crew single-handed. He'd seen the derisive gleams in their eyes, the sly grins on their dirty, sweaty faces. And Stud Moonan's barbed comments egged them on.

The branding was only half-done when the sun slid behind the jagged western peaks, and long shadows laid searching fingers across the valley. To the last man, the Broken Spur crew quit whatever they were doing and trailed up to the chuckwagon behind their big ramrod. Crosby met them there.

"We're hungry," growled Moonan, wiping a dirty hand across his grimy face; "why ain't Cooky got his ovens going?"

Crosby said, "When you've earned a

meal, you'll get it. I told him not to light 'em. Any objections?"

Moonan's head jerked upward, his jet eyes glowing like a cat's in the deepening dusk. "Meaning?"

"Just what I said. Get back to the job! It's going to be finished if it takes all night! Then you'll eat."

Stud's big hand yanked at the tie strings under his blue-stubbled chin. Tossing his hat to the ground, he stood there gauging the crew until he knew they were still with him. "Mister Crosby," he sneered, "we aim to eat— pronto! After that we'll talk over this night-work idea. Maybe you don't see it that way?"

"No!" said Crosby. "I don't!"

HE SPUN his own hat under the wagonbed as Moonan slid forward, dodging the looping fist that came at him. The pent-up anger inside Crosby gave added power to the fist that sank into the ramrod's lean belly. The breath gusted out of the older man's lungs; he backed away, a surprised look on his face.

Moonan was lithe as a mountain cat. Flat muscles rippled over shoulders and arms with his quick movements. An ugly grin twisted his heavy-boned face, burned black by searing New Mexican suns.

Crosby crowded the man, trying to keep him off-balance, but he lacked the experience Moonan had picked up in years of rough-and-tumble scrapping. He discovered it too late; Stud suddenly set his sharp heels in the dry sod and sent a flurry of rock-hard fists at him. One of those blows caught him in the ribs. Crosby involuntarily lowered his arms as pain knifed through him. Grinning confidently, Moonan glided in, smashing a vicious right hook to Crosby's jaw.

The Broken Spur owner should have gone down; he staggered on wobbly legs. Confident that the fight was over, Moonan stood there, grinning and blowing on his skinned knuckles.

Crosby did not go down. He weaved on leaden feet, trying to shake the dizziness out of his head. One thought dominated his mind. *He wasn't afraid!* Moonan was the second man that he'd tangled with in twenty-four hours—and each time that dry sucking fear had vanished. The doc was right; now that the bullet was gone, there was nothing to be afraid of. *He was cured!*

That circle of tough horse wranglers, waiting for Les Crosby to go down, saw a strange thing. He straightened, shook off the effects of that terrible blow. He laughed harshly in the astonished ramrod's face and said, "Moonan, how much did Matt Furness pay you to kill Dad?"

Anyone who saw Les Crosby always admired his build. Les was five-ten in his bare feet, and he packed one hundred eighty pounds of solid flesh on his compact frame. Muscles padded his big chest and his flat belly. His broad shoulders out-spanned any man in the roundup crew. His long, muscular legs belonged to a champ rider.

Stud Moonan did not answer the question so suddenly thrown at him. His face might have turned gray; if so the dusk hid it. His eyes blazed with new ferocity. He came at Crosby again, deadly purpose marking his fluid movement.

Crosby met him halfway. He drove into the man, head low, arms swinging. To hell with smart fighting! He wanted to feel Moonan's flesh under his fists, to see respect flit into those black eyes. He intended to beat the big ramrod until he whined for mercy and confessed his part in old Cy's murder.

THE BROKEN SPUR hands talked about that battle for months afterward. Those two big scrappers lit into each other like a couple of stallions fighting over a band of mares. First, one man went down, then the other. Moonan tried every dirty trick he knew; Crosby came back with more of

the same. Blood masked their faces; their clothing hung in shreds. The whoops and cries of the watching men turned into fascinated silence, broken only by the labored breathing of the tiring fighters and the slow scuffling of their boots on the grass.

Tex Ramsay finally broke it up.

"Grab Stud!" he yelled, stepping up behind Crosby and pinning his arms to his sides. "This could go on all night. Right now, Miss Diana could take on the pair of 'em easy." He stared hard-eyed at his companions. "We got work to do; you heard the boss' orders. I'm hungry, and I aim to eat tonight."

At the chuckwagon's rear, Tex sloshed dippers of cool liquid from the water barrel over Crosby's face and shoulders. "Big Jube last night, Stud Moonan tonight," the redhead marveled. "Everybody sure had you figured wrong, Les. I wish the Old Man could have seen it; they ain't two saltier hombres in this country." He laughed shamefacedly. "Your trouble here is over. The boys'll have those colts branded in jig-time."

Crosby said nothing. Tex stared at him, cleared his throat and started to say something else. Thinking better of it, he turned toward his nearby horse. Settling in the saddle, he giggered the animal over close to his boss.

"Les," he said in a low voice, "how did you come to accuse Moonan of killing the Old Man?"

"A hunch," muttered Crosby. "Just a hunch."

Tex said, "Uh-huh," and rode on out to the colt herd.

Crosby snaked a soap box from under the wagon and sank down upon it, wondering if his battered body would hang together. His flesh throbbed and every muscle ached; he looked about the camp and saw Moonan bending over his warbag.

Gritting his teeth, Crosby hobbled over to his ramrod. Moonan's face looked as if a sawmill had worked it over. Except for Cooky, who was busy

at his ovens now, the two men were alone in the camp.

"You never answered my question," said Crosby. "There's going to be one, Moonan. Furness hired you to kill Dad, didn't he?"

Moonan did not look up. "You're loco," he muttered. "That kind of talk will get you into plenty trouble."

"Not if it's true. Why don't you deny it?"

THE COOKFIRES sent weak shadows flickering about the two men. Crosby could not see his foreman's eyes as the man swung around to face him. But the play of light on metal revealed the heavy pistol in his hand.

Moonan said, "I don't take shoving around. Nobody in his right mind would say I killed old Cy. Hell, I been with him for fifteen years! You let them horses stomp him to death, Crosby. You did it because you hated his guts. I heard your fuss with him the other morning, and so did the boys; you ain't fooling a one of us." His voice hardened. His hands lifted, the gun's muzzle yawning ominously in Crosby's face. "I ought to kill you. One more peep out of you and I will; so help me, mister, that's a promise!"

Crosby was near death and he knew it. He'd stepped out on a shaky limb and his ramrod had sawed it out from under him. He'd accused Moonan of murder; but except in Les' own mind, there wasn't the slightest shred of proof to back his random charge. Wisely, he kept his mouth shut.

Moonan's short laugh broke the tense silence. "Now you can get another foreman; I'm quitting!"

"No," Crosby answered, "not in the middle of roundup. The Association will blackball you all over the state unless I fire you, and I'm not going to do that. I need you, Moonan. You'll help brand the rest of those colts tonight. Savvy?"

Crosby's knees trembled as he de-

fled his foreman. What if the man squeezed that trigger? It was a gamble he had to take; whatever the risk, he had to keep Moonan on the ranch. He couldn't let Stud ride away, taking the secret of old Cy's death with him.

Moonan toyed with the pistol, finally placed it in his warbag. "You'll be sorry," he mumbled through smashed lips. Turning, he limped toward his horse.

Crosby was saddling a fresh mount when the clatter of steel-shod hoofs was swept up the valley on the evening breeze. A few moments later, Sheriff Pat Keefe rode into the circle of firelight. The lean lawman stepped down out of saddle. He greeted Crosby casually, and ate the warmed-over food that Cooky brought him.

The man wasn't here just for the ride, Crosby knew. He asked, "What's on your mind, Pat?"

"Plenty," said Keefe, his cold eyes boring at Crosby. "You promised to stay in town. Why did you leave without looking me up?"

"Your wires are kind of crossed," Crosby argued. "You were supposed to look me up at the hotel. Remember? When you didn't, I came back here. I've got work to do."

Keefe drawled, "So have I. The coroner performed an autopsy on Cy. How-come you didn't tell us that he died from a rifle bullet through his heart!"

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ROSBY stood there, dumbfounded, the color draining from his battered face. "Shot! Through the heart! Th- Then—"

Sheriff Keefe's eyes were hard as ice. His lean jaws worked on a huge chunk of juicy beef.

He wiped the back of his hand across his thin lips and said, "You heard it right. A horse-stampede didn't kill Cy; he was dead before he got tromped on. Looks damned funny to me. Why did you try to hide it, Les?"

"I-I didn't!" Crosby stammered, fighting the sudden excitement within him. "This is the first I knew about it. I swear it is!"

Keefe shook his head. "I expected that answer. You packin' a gun?"

"No," said Crosby. "My sixgun is in my bedroll. You want it?"

His crew had spotted trouble. He saw them come drifting back into camp. They gathered silently about him and the sheriff.

Again the lawman shook his head. "Not interested. How about a saddle-gun? You don't ride these hills without one."

Crosby saw what was in Keefe's mind. "My Winchester's in the wagon; I put it there before taking Dad into town yesterday. You accusing me of murdering my own father?"

Ignoring the question, Pat Keefe walked over to the wagonbed and searched for the carbine. Jacking out an empty shell, he smelled of the gun's breech. "Been fired recent," he told the Broken Spur crew. "Here's the empty case. That's evidence for any jury."

"I didn't foul that gun," Crosby objected, knowing he didn't have a chance. "Whoever *did* shoot Dad must have done it, figuring I'd get the blame."

Keefe eyed him stonily. "The evidence tallies for me. We're riding back to Red Rock tonight. You face the coroner's inquest tomorrow; Ramsay and Moonan better come along, too."

"Not Tex," Crosby pleaded. "He's my new foreman—starting right now! I need him here to handle roundup for me. Give me a break, Pat. Randy Allen saw the stampede yesterday. Take him instead. Tex and the rest of the boys

will be in town Saturday. You can question them there."

"All right," Keefe agreed. "Let's ride."

RED ROCK'S adobe jail was empty and quiet. Crosby slept away the early morning hours. When he awoke, he found his body one solid ache, every muscle protesting the slightest movement.

He got to his feet and stared at his swollen face in the fly-specked mirror on the wall. Moonan's fists had done a thorough job, and Les' face wasn't a pleasant sight. He stretched out on the steel cot again.

The stampede up in Squaw Canyon flashed before his eyes in vivid panorama. So did the rest of it: Moonan's blunt charge that he had deliberately let those wild broncs tromp his father to death—the long, dreary ride into town to deliver Cy to the undertaker—Matt Furness' quick move to obtain Broken Spur, and the fight with Jube—the obvious manner in which Moonan had slowed down the roundup, and that bloody battle with him. Finally, his own arrest for the murder of his father.

As Les put the pieces together, they made a pattern that would put a hemp necktie around his neck unless a miracle happened to save him.

The rattle of a key in his cell door brought Crosby to a sitting position on the cot. "Company," Sheriff Keefe said; "I'll wait in the office for you, Miss Ann."

Ann Palmer was the prettiest girl Crosby had ever seen. Slim and straight, her tailored blouse and foxed riding pants covered a multitude of curves. Her dark hair fell in thick waves about her square shoulders. Her presence always brought a disturbing unrest to Les Crosby.

He stammered a greeting, feeling the rush of crimson that spread from his neck up to his crisp blond hair.

The girl gasped at sight of his puffed, bruised face.

"I brought some news," she said softly, moving closer so that the scent of her perfume swirled over him. "I thought you'd like to know. I've been with Diana for several nights. She took Mr. Crosby's death awfully hard. Tex Ramsay brought your colts in early this morning. He told us ab-about your arrest. Tex got word that Diamond F is bringing in their herd today. So he's bringing in your herd, too. I rode in to tell Dad about it."

Her eyes glowed like blue-fire. Listening to the husky words that came from her red lips, Crosby almost forgot that an Army contract worth forty thousand dollars was slipping out of his grasp.

"There's something else I must tell you," Ann murmured. "I don't want anyone to hear." She glanced back at the jail office where the sheriff waited, then whispered for a long time in Crosby's ear.

A semblance of a grin twisted his bruised features when she had finished. He mumbled, "I don't know how to thank you."

"Don't try," she answered.

DOC RANDALL'S office was jammed with people when Sheriff Keefe entered with his prisoner. The coroner's jury sat on plank benches with a side wall for a back rest. Cy Crosby's body lay in a plain coffin set on sawhorses at the rear of the room. A narrow lane opened for the lawman and his charge.

Motioning Crosby to an empty seat, Keefe sat down beside him. The little medico, serving now as coroner, wiped his spectacles on the lapel of his shiny black coat and got to his feet to open the investigation.

As Randall gave an official summary of old Cy's death and the autopsy's findings, Crosby sized up the jury. Ed Palmer was one of the chosen six. He nodded a greeting. Other friends of the dead ranchman sat there in grim-faced

silence. Crosby's eyes widened at sight of Matt Furness' huge bulk among them.

How had his father's sworn enemy managed to edge into this inquiry? With the exception of Ed Palmer, the other jurors were plainly hostile, too; Les' indictment for murder was almost certain.

"We'll start with Moonan," said Randall, and the big ex-foreman stepped out of the crowd. "Tell us what happened the morning that Cy Crosby was murdered."

Moonan stood uneasily before the jury. His swollen face was splashed with iodine. He still wore the dirty, blood-stained denim shirt and levis of the night before. His wide brimmed range hat hung from his fingers by the tie strings.

"The Old Man was on the prod that morning," he mumbled through lacerated lips. "He ate us out good and proper for draggin' our tails on roundup—and tromped on Les extra hard."

Randall cut in, "Why?"

"They'd been fussin' for months. Everybody knew the Old Man was about to go under. He was plenty edgy, and at them times he always jumped Les. Called him a yellabelly, a shirker, and a few other pet names. We got to where we didn't think anything of it."

The story of Moonan's fight with Les Crosby had gotten around. He reddened under the crowd's scrutiny, unconsciously raised a hand to his battered face.

"I see," Randall said drily. "Go ahead with your story."

"Me and Les, along with Tex Ramsay and Randy Allen, rode up Squaw Canyon. We scattered at the far end. We left Les at the neck that opens into the pens. His job was to hold back any broncs that we choused his way until the Old Man had replaced some rotten poles in the trap. We didn't see Les for a couple of hours. We heard the stampede and figured he'd spilled

the herd. By the time we got there, the Old Man was dead."

Stud looked balefully at Crosby. "We didn't know about any bullet wound in Cy. But after that tongue-lashing he gave Les that morning, it didn't take no smart hombre to see what had happened."

RANDY ALLEN was next on the stand. He echoed Moonan's story almost word for word. "One thing puzzles me," he concluded. "Les' mouse pony went down in that stampede. Les was lucky to come out of it alive; that was easy to see. If Les planned to kill the Old Man, his gettin' caught under them hooves don't make sense. Looks to me like he did try to warn his dad."

"That's just what he wants everybody to think!" snapped Moonan. "He's planned to take over Broken Spur for a long time. He had to rub out Cy to do it."

Doc Randall held up his hand for silence. "There seems to be no doubt that Les Crosby was within easy rifle range of his father for over an hour. That right, Les?"

"Sure I was, but so was Moonan, or the others. And Moonan packed a saddle-gun that morning; I didn't."

Moonan growled, "You're lying, Crosby!"

"I can prove it!" Crosby argued. The jurymen leaned forward in their seats. A thick silence slid over the room. Crosby turned to Randy Allen. "Did either you or Tex stick with Moonan all the time you were in Squaw Canyon that morning?"

"No. We scattered."

"If you'd wanted to shoot Dad without the rest of us knowing it, *could* you have done it?"

Randy said uneasily, "I reckon so. Squaw Canyon is heavily timbered all over them slopin' walls. It wouldn't be no trick to slip up on a wall and take a shot at anybody in the trap."

"That's just what Moonan did!"

Crosby's face hardened. "He knew I'd get the blame!"

Stud jeered uneasily, "A likely yarn: why would I want to put a slug into old Cy?"

"To keep him from hanging you to the nearest tree!"

A buzz of excited voices swept over the room. After the noise died down, Crosby continued, "Put it this way: suppose Moonan was drawing pay from both Broken Spur and some shady outfit that steals our saddle stuff and sells it below the border? Suppose Moonan and this outfit have been venting our brand on all our colts, slapping on a strange brand, letting our colts run with their mammies, knowing we ain't likely to spot 'em so far back in the hills?"

"That's why we lost the Army contract these past two years; our colts were rustled each winter. This year we were almost cleaned. We had to comb the hills for new stuff. That's where Moonan slipped up. Dad commenced spotting those vented brands. Moonan was desperate, knowing there'd be an accounting with Dad when roundup was over. No foreman who was watching his job would have overlooked what was going on. Moonan did the only thing he could to save his skin; he sneaked up on the side of the canyon the other day and shot Dad, right after stampeding those wild broncs. He knew the noise would cover him. I got the blame."

A heavy silence closed over the room when Crosby finished. Moonan stared venomously at him, yet panic lurked in his jet eyes.

"Les, that's a good yarn," Doc Randall said, "but it won't hold water in any court, unless you can prove it."

Crosby answered, "I can. Miss Palmer has something to tell the jury. Do you mind?"

"Not at all," the doctor said, peering over his spectacles at Ann. "Please step forward, Miss Palmer."

ANN WORE a trim, gray dress that showed every curve. The jury leaned forward. By the light that danced in grizzled Ed Palmer's eyes, Crosby knew that the girl had already told him her story.

"Early Wednesday morning, the—the day that Mr. Crosby was killed," she began in a husky voice, "I was visiting Diana Crosby at the ranch. At my insistence, we rode out to watch the roundup. We kept out of sight because Mr. Crosby didn't allow any women in camp. It was early. Diana and I followed four riders into the hills. We lost them in Squaw Canyon. When we turned back, we saw Mr. Crosby working in the big corral below us. Diana was scared so we circled high upon the slopes, trying to find a way out."

Crosby, watching Stud Moonan, saw beads of sweat gather on the man's dark forehead. Others saw it too. Moonan's sharp glance darted about like that of a treed panther.

"One moment, Miss Palmer," cut in Doc Randall. "Can you identify those four men you followed into the hills?"

Ann pointed a slim finger at Moonan. "Yes, he was one; Les Crosby and Randy Allen and Tex Ramsay were the others. Diana told me their names."

"Go ahead," the little medico said.

The girl turned to the jury. "There isn't much more to tell. Diana and I heard a rider, coming fast up the slope. We hid behind some brush. It was Mr. Crosby's foreman—that man there." Again she pointed at Moonan. "He carried a carbine across his lap. He stopped where we could watch him, and fired at Mr. Crosby down in the corral. We saw the old man fall to the ground. I put a hand over Diana's mouth to keep her from screaming. Then we heard the stampede below us. This man hurried back down to the canyon floor. If we hadn't been so close to him, we'd never have heard that shot—"

Moonan moved fast, crashing his way through the spectators. Crosby saw him plunge through a side window, holding his hands before his face to ward off the shards of breaking glass.

"Quick!" yelled Sheriff Keefe, leaping onto his feet. "Into the alley! Keep him away from the horses!"

The crowd surged into the alley, but Moonan had disappeared. Crosby joined in the search. They hunted the back streets and sent deputies through homes and stores; mounted men scoured the flat range country about Red Rock town. No one found their prey.

Crosby had a hunch that Moonan would turn up again. Baffled at the man's quick disappearance, he finally drifted back to Randall's office. He joined Ann and her father there. An hour later, the manhunt had ended; the unsuccessful posse gathered in the room again.

When the inquest was over, Stud Moonan was charged with old Cy Crosby's murder. The decision was barely spoken when the rumbling thunder of countless hooves laid an electrifying grip over the town.

Matt Furness paused beside Crosby. A triumphant smile lay on his pockmarked face. "That'll be my Giff bringing in our herd," he boasted in his loud voice. "This finishes you, Crosby; you'll come crawling to me now. After the rodeo Monday, I'll own Broken Spur!"

Crosby ignored the giant. Sliding into the flood of excited people headed for the loading corrals, he let them carry him along to the railroad spur on the west side of town.

He found Ed Palmer beside him. They pulled up at the pens, breathing hard, staring at the dark, swift-moving patch to the west.

Diamond F lay in that direction. Furness horses!

"Too bad," the Army buyer mut-

tered. "I hoped you'd win this year."

Crosby turned and stared miserably at the rugged country to the north. His herd was somewhere in those distant ramparts.

"Ed, look!" He caught Palmer's arm and swung him around. "Tex made it! There he comes! It's a close race!"

Thundering across the flats, bushy manes flying and unshod hoofs pounding, came the Broken Spur herd. Like flitting phantoms, Crosby's crew ate their dust, waving big sombreros and whooping at the top of leathern lungs, speeding the wild-eyed broncs ahead with over-head shots from their six-guns.

FIFTEEN minutes later, eight hundred horses were penned in the stout corrals; the argument as to who had won the race was still going on.

"We're gitting nowhere!" cried Palmer, facing the tight circle of Diamond F and Broken Spur wranglers. "Both herds were delivered at the same time. I want to be fair about it. I'll buy one herd; which one will I take?"

Matt Furness said, "It can be settled fair and square—if Crosby's got the guts to go along on it."

"I'm listening," Crosby answered warily.

Triumph lay dark and ugly across the big man's face. "It's an old story—the fight between me and Cy Crosby. Put the two outfits together and what do you have? Just about the biggest and sweetest layout that anybody could want. That's why Cy and me fought all these years. One of us had to go!"

"And you made sure it was Dad!" snapped Crosby recklessly. "You hired Moonan to kill him!"

For a moment, he thought big Matt would spring upon him. Hate glowed in the giant's piggish eyes. He held out his arms, holding back his two sons who pressed forward.

"Not yet, boys," he muttered. "We'll skin this goose at the proper time. You

got no proof, Crosby, that I'm behind Cy's murder. You couldn't prove it because it ain't so. I didn't need to beef him; I already had him over a barrel—the same barrel that's shaking under you.

"Remember that agreement you put in your pocket the other night? Did you check on it with the sheriff here?"

Crosby had forgotten the scrap of paper. His shirt pocket was luckily intact though the garment was ripped in a dozen places, from the fight with Moonan. He fished it out and handed it to Pat Keefe. "How about it?" he asked. "Does it hold water, Pat?"

The lawman read the note. "I've got a copy in my desk," he said. "As far as Cy was concerned, it was legal."

"I'm holding you to Cy's written word," Matt Furness declared. "The rodeo Monday will see you or me go down, and the winner takes the Army contract! How about it, Crosby? That agreeable with you, Palmer?"

"It's a trick," Tex Ramsay swore angrily from behind Crosby; "don't listen to him, Les."

The old familiar panic tugged at Crosby. He remembered how eager his father had always been to hire top-hands, the interest the Old Man had always shown in his, Les', ability at range work. Old Cy had probably signed that agreement in a reckless moment. Keeping good men on his payroll had kept Broken Spur out of Furness hands. Big Matt had shied away from calling that agreement for ten years—until he figured there was no longer a gamble attached to the move.

Now that the Diamond F owner was using his privilege, Crosby felt a clammy fear at the prospect. Forty thousand dollars and big Matt's ranch—or nothing!

"You've made a deal," he told the big man, knowing there was nothing left for him to do. He had no other choice.

- 4 -



HE CROWD, overflowing the rodeo grounds, thundered the traditional words that Monday afternoon—“Let ‘er buck!”—and the contest began. But this year there was an impatient undertone to the stands’ wild roar. Word of the winner-take-all bet between Diamond F and Broken Spur was on every tongue.

Even Stud Moonan’s escape and the wild speculation as to his whereabouts was forgotten.

Crosby, standing beside a saddling chute, knew fear again. He chewed his lower lip nervously. That dry sucking rot that turned him into a coward was gone; this fear was different. He’d signed up for the steer bulldogging and roping, and the bronc riding. He couldn’t let his outfit down; Broken Spur needed every man that could place today.

Five men sat in the judging stand. Ed Palmer and Sheriff Keefe were among them, at Crosby’s insistence; the judging should be on the square.

The steer roping was nearly over when Giff Furness’ name was called out over the loudspeakers. Matt Furness’ oldest son was his foreman, and a tophand. He was the man to watch this afternoon. For several years he had walked away with top money in the contests.

Crosby broke into a cold sweat, watching the lanky, swart rider settle his well-knit frame into the saddle. After Giff, Crosby rode next. Broken Spur and Diamond F had run neck and neck through the calf roping and the free-for-all cowpony race. From here on out, the big money events would count heavily.

A big Texas longhorn took out across

the arena. Eating its dust came Giff Furness’ speedy pony. *Swish!* His loop settled over the needle-sharp horns. The mossyhorn crashed to the ground. Giff quit his saddle and raced to the stunned animal, deftly hog-tying its legs. His hands shot up into the air as he got to his feet.

“Twenty-four seconds!” blared the megaphones.

It was first class busting; Giff wore a big smirk on his dark face as he sauntered out of the arena.

Crosby tried to still the uneasiness that ran through him as his own name was announced. He hadn’t roped under this sort of pressure in years. As he slid into his saddle, he wished he had his mouse pony under him instead of the star-faced buckskin. The buck was all cowpony but that mouse horse had been his favorite.

A big brindle longhorn dashed out into the arena. Giving the brute the customary thirty-foot start, Crosby took after it, building a loop. *Swish!* A perfect throw over those spreading horns. The buck swung off at just the right angle. The rope tightened like a steel cable. The big steer somersaulted in a cloud of dust, landing heavily on its side.

Trusting the buck to hold the rope tight, Crosby slid to the ground, carrying a short pigging string in his hand. He plunged into that maelstrom of flying dirt and churning hoofs. Seconds later, he stood up, hands held high over his head to signify victory.

“Twenty-three seconds!”

A measure of relief came to Crosby when Tex Ramsay latched onto third place. Broken Spur had edged ahead.

A hush came over the packed stands as the announcer’s voice blared through the megaphones. “Here it is, folks! The contest you’ve been waitin’ for! The knock-‘em-down, drag-‘em-about steer bulldogging event!

“Watch Chute Four! Giff Furness comin’ out!”

CROSBY straddled the chute bars in time to see Giff spur his pony after his steer. Big Jube was hazing for him. Together, they drove the angry bull around the track. Squarely in front of the grandstand, Giff pulled up beside the tiring animal. Measuring the distance, he left his saddle, grabbing for both needle-sharp horns. Dust boiled about the pair as they fought each other. The steer went down. Giff held up one hand and the stands let out a roar.

"Twenty-five seconds!" came the timer's announcement.

Furness had displayed championship form. Once again fear knotted in the pit of Crosby's stomach. First money in this event would put Diamond F ahead. He mounted the buckskin as his name blared out of the megaphones. In the barrier, he stared nervously at Tex Ramsay who was hazing for him. Tex grinned back.

The gate was whisked open. His steer, a big black bull with curving horns, broke into the open. Crosby turned the buck loose. He overhauled the wild-eyed longhorn in a scant hundred yards. Directly in front of the stands, he plunged from his pony and gripped those slick horns in his sweaty hands. He hung on, digging his boot-heels into the dry ground; it took him another fifty yards to stop the big brute.

Muscles of steel sheathed that steer's scabby neck. As he tried to twist those slippery horns, Crosby wondered if his arms were being pulled out of their sockets. The slobbery nose slowly came up. Triumph ran through Crosby. Placing the weight of his body against the lower horn, he slid both hands to the steer's upturned muzzle and tried for the throw. The animal cunningly shifted its body and tossed its head. Crosby's hold was broken.

This time he grabbed at those sharp horns to keep from being gored or trampled to death. Off-balance and on the defensive, all thought of throwing

the maddened brute had ended; he would do well to escape without serious injury now.

Crash! The board fence shook and splintered as twelve hundred pounds of fury charged it, trying to crush the clinging man. Somehow Crosby managed to hold on. The shock of those terrific blows was fast turning his muscles to water. Again and again the big brute tried to shake him off. At last the maddened animal whirled and dashed along the track.

Crosby hung onto one horn with both hands, wondering how much more he could take. Blood stained his torn clothing. A dizzy blackness stabbed at him. The triumphant bull tossed his head. Crosby plunged to the ground. He lay there, stunned, awaiting those sharp hoofs and horns.

They never came; Tex Ramsay's rope sung through the air just in time. Crosby climbed unsteadily to his feet.

The mighty cheer from the stands hardly penetrated his dark thoughts. His failure had almost blasted Broken Spur's chances. Tex might place in this contest. It brought small comfort. Big Jube was almost his brother's equal at bulldogging; they were sure to take first and second place.

Crosby rested his aching body atop the hoof-scarred chute bars for the rest of the event, watching the growing confidence that spread over Diamond F. Over-anxious, Randy Allen misjudged his steer and landed on its head, forcing a horn into the dirt. The big brute somersaulted and lay motionless, its neck broken, and Randy was disqualified for "hoofthaning." Jube Furness busted his steer in twenty-seven seconds. Tex Ramsay managed to take third place. Diamond F forged far ahead.

WORRY WAS plastered across dust-grimed Broken Spur faces as the buckers were wrangled into the holding pens. Crosby shared the growing misery of his men. Broken Spur

had to win first and second money in the bronc riding—or pass into Matt Furness' hands!

The announcer said, "Keep your eyes on Chute Three, folks! It's Shoot-in' Star! Tex Ramsay up!"

"Shooting Star!" gasped Randy Allen. His beardless face paled. He stared wide-eyed at the long-maned, thick-jawed black horse that rattled the chute bars with vicious swipes of his forefeet, fighting the saddle that the men working the chutes tried to put on his humped back. "That's the man-killer they condemned in Santa Fe last year. How did he get into this rodeo?"

Up in the stand, Ed Palmer and Sheriff Keefe were arguing with the other three judges. Crosby got the idea in a hurry.

"Matt Furness sucked me in," he said heavily. "He managed to pack the judging stand against Ed and Pat. He furnished most of the buckers too—and slipped that black killer in. You're not riding him, Tex; I'm putting in a protest."

Tex shook his freckled face. "No, boss. There's a little gal named Diana Crosby watchin' in the stands. She thinks I can ride anything with hair on it; I told her so."

"Not me—not for no woman," Randy muttered as Tex climbed the chute bars and gingerly eased his weight into the heaving saddle.

Shooting Star came twisting out of the chute in a series of spine-jarring jumps. Crosby got his first good look at the famous horse. His aching body grew taut as a bowstring.

There was something mighty familiar about the outlaw. That star strip between its eyes, the faint stockings above each flashing hoof; somewhere he'd had dealings with that bronc before.

Shooting Star was a fighting, man-hating, bucking demon. Already his twisting lunges had Tex in trouble. A cloud of hoof-churned dust went up,

obscuring horse and rider. A moment later the black horse tore out of it. Tex still rode him slick, taped spur rowsels raking the sweaty hide from withers to rump. But not for long. In the next spine-jolting leap, Shooting Star snapped his rider off balance. Tex weaved drunkenly in the saddle like a lashing whip.

Then the black devil untwisted with blinding speed. The wicked jolt shook Tex loose from leather, spilling him limply in the dirt. The outlaw reared up; ears back, teeth bared, hoofs striking viciously, he came down on Tex's sprawled body.

A sudden hush slid over the stands. Somewhere a woman screamed. Crosby wondered if it were Diana. The pick-up men roped Shooting Star and dragged him away from his victim.

Doc Randall was working on Tex when Crosby shouldered through the crowd. "Is he hurt bad, Doc?"

"Two, maybe three broken ribs. Can't tell about internal injuries yet. A broken wrist and some bad bites. He's lucky to be alive."

Crosby's shoulders sagged wearily as he turned away to hide the moisture that came to his eyes. His hate for Matt Furness had become a demoniac thing inside him.

He helped them carry Tex out of the arena to the rodeo first-aid shelter.

"Rider up!" yelled a hazer. The starting gun popped. Giff Furness came out of the chute on Clabber Foot, a show buckler that was certain to put any man who rode him into the money. The bronc put his nose down between his front feet and cut past the stands in a series of jolting, straight-away bucks. Giff raked his hide at every leap, fanning him with his big sombrero. It was a ride that brought the crowd to its feet, cheering mightily as a pick-up man pulled him from the saddle after the ten-second limit had expired.

Crosby hardly saw that ride. He

kept worrying about Tex and wondering how any man could stoop low enough to slip a condemned killer horse into a rodeo. Randy Allen's rope-caloused fingers, biting into his arm, snapped him out of his reverie. "Looky, Les! It's me and you now; we got to beat Giff's ride. First and second money is the only thing that'll save us!"

The knowledge that Broken Spur was slipping through his fingers settled on Crosby like a shroud. Mechanically, he plodded over to the chutes. The gate flew open. Randy came out on Mule Ears, a Roman nosed buckskin outlaw that was seldom topped.

"Yee-e-e-ep!" the slim youngster whooped as Mule Ears came uncorked. A cloud of dust billowed over them as the big brute dove and twisted and turned. Randy made his ride in spectacular manner, big spurs scratching, big hat fanning. Waving aside the pick-up man, he rode the defeated outlaw back to the holding pens.

The stands went wild. It was the money ride of the day, but Crosby doubted that the biased judging stand would count it that way. Broken Spur's only chance for top money lay in a hands-down exhibition, a miracle performance that Matt Furness' crooked judges would not dare cheat a rider out of.

KNIFING through the crowd's roar came the words that Crosby had been dreading. "Chute One, folks! It's Shootin' Star again! And ridin' him—Les Crosby!"

Randy Allen's angry voice grated in Crosby's ear. "The dirty sons! We'll protest, Les! Remember what happened to Tex?"

Over by the fence, Giff Furness watched them out of cold, pale eyes. Beside him, Jube watched too, a sardonic grin twisting his beefy face.

"It's a put-up job," Crosby muttered. "They knew we couldn't win from the start. Handing me that killer

is their way of playing safe. But what if I ride him, Randy? I'm going to try!"

Shaking off Randy's protests, Crosby climbed the chute bars. Just staring down at the bobbing saddle on Shooting Star's humped back made him sick inside. Cold sweat beaded his chalky face. He wasn't scared of the horse. He'd licked that fear. But he was scared stiff at the stake that hung on this ride.

He eased his weight slowly down into the saddle. It was all a blur. Somebody shoved the soft white halter rope into his hand. A voice asked him if he was all set. He could feel the big horse's muscles bunching under him. He must have nodded his head for the chute gate flew open.

"Let 'er buck!" roared the thrill-hungry crowd, rising to its feet.

The black outlaw quit the chute with a mighty leap, cracking the cantle against Crosby's back, throwing him off-balance. His head felt as if it would snap off. Instinctively, he swung his muscular legs forward and back, raking with the spurs as the squealing bronc pitched across the arena.

A dozen vicious, man-killing jumps later, Crosby was still in the saddle. Amazement cleared his foggy brain as he realized that he was riding the loco brute by sheer instinct. Confidence came then. He straightened in the saddle, his body weaving rhythmically to the jarring movements of the outlaw.

"Scratch him, Les!" yelled Randy Allen as Shooting Star pitched past the chutes. There was a big grin on Randy's face; nobody had ever stayed on the killer bronc this long before.

Wild triumph hammered at Crosby. He raked the black's sweaty hide with every jump, concentrating on those great humping shoulders, causing the horse to flinch and circle away from the wire fence before the stands. Shooting Star tried every trick he knew, his berserk efforts increasing with every

failure to dislodge the human cockle-bur on his back.

Somewhere in that mad ride, Crosby heard the timer's whistle. The outlaw straightened out into a run, admitting defeat. The pick-up men approached. Crosby waved them off; there might be more fight left in the animal. But Shooting Star had had enough.

Handing the halter rope to a pick-up man, Crosby quit the saddle with a leap that put him beyond those wicked hoofs. His aching legs almost folded under him. His body had absorbed a fearful pounding on that ride.

The Broken Spur crew surrounded him, shouting congratulations, pounding him on the back. Crosby wanly acknowledged their praise. He kept an eye on Shooting Star as the wranglers put him in a pen. Now he remembered where he had known that black horse in the past.

From out of the megaphone came the announcement of the judges' decision. "Winner in the bronc ridin'—Les Crosby! Second place—Giff Furness! Third place goes to Randy Allen!"

THE CROWD'S pleased roar boomed over the arena. But the Broken Spur hands showed no pleasure. Randy Allen had easily won second money. The trumped-up decision was unfair. A grimness settled over them.

Randy slipped a sixshooter into Crosby's hand. "You'll need it," he warned.

Crosby saw that all his men wore holstered guns now, or had weapons shoved under their belts.

"Take it easy," he told them; "we haven't lost yet."

He watched the compact group that broke through the crowd, overflowing the rodeo grounds. Ed Palmer and Pat Keefe, big Matt Furness and his two boys.

Palmer angrily waved his hand. "The Army buys no horses from a cheap crook! You won fair and square, Les; the contract is yours!"

Matt Furness' eyes glowed like two

chipped diamonds under his tall beaver hat. One big hand slid under his frock coat to the gun in the shoulder holster. Big Jube and the lanky Giff dropped their hands to the sixguns at their hips.

"We won!" Matt choked. "There'll be no welshing!"

"Maybe," Crosby agreed, "but before you take over, I've got some questions I want answered about that outlaw I just rode."

The big ranchman muttered, "You rode him; nobody else ever did. Ain't that enough?"

Crosby said, "No. Mind coming into the pen a moment. You'd better come along, Sheriff; you might be interested."

Shooting Star laid back his ears and nervously backed away as Crosby crawled through the pen bars. The others came in through the gate. The rest of the Diamond and Spur hands quietly took posts around the corral. Except for a nearby barn in which feed for the rodeo stock was stored, there was no other shelter.

A Diamond F brand was on the black's rump, plus a strange brand. "Whose vent brand is that?" Crosby asked.

"An outfit in Mexico," stormed Furness; "they sold him cheap because nobody could ride him."

"That all you know about him? You got a bill of sale?"

Big Matt muttered, "Yeah, I got proof of ownership. What are you trying to say, Crosby?"

Les Crosby eyed the big man contemptuously. "I once had a black colt marked like Shooting Star. He was stolen one night—after an argument with Jube. I never saw him again, until today. There he is, Matt; I'm saying that Jube rustled him from our pasture. A lot of our colts have disappeared these past years; I'm saying that you know plenty about them too!"

"A damn nice story!" Furness growled. "Prove it!"

Crosby smiled queerly. "I thought a

lot of that little colt. So much that I hated to put a brand on him and leave an ugly mark. Know what I did? I put my initials on the top of his neck where that black mane would hide them. You've put your brand on Shooting Star since, but I'm betting my L. C. brand is still hidden on his neck. You care to lift that mane and prove me wrong—"

"Hist your hands!"

The snarling words came from the barn beside the pen. "Get out of there, Matt," it said. "I'll keep 'em harmless until you're gone; I'll drill the first man that moves to stop you!"

Crosby tensed, ready to leap in any direction. He probed the gloomy interior of the barn and could not locate the owner of that voice. But the mystery of Stud Moonan's whereabouts was solved.

CURSING harshly, holding his stubby sneak-gun before him, Matt Furness backed through the gate. Giff and Jube followed him like two faithful hound dogs.

Hate changed to murderous decision in big Matt's piggish eyes. The gun in his hand spat flame. The bullet plucked at Crosby's hat as he dropped flat on the ground. Jerking the pistol out of his belt, he rose to one knee and fired at the giant in the gate. Simultaneously, the muffled sound of a rifle shot came from the barn. Lead seared along Crosby's ribs like a redhot poker.

Jube and Giff were shooting now. A ragged volley of gunfire surged all about Crosby as the crews of both outfits joined in.

Beside him, Randy Allen fired once. The lanky Giff straightened out of his crouch. His smoking gun dropped out of his hand; his limp body covered the weapon a moment later. Crosby got to his feet as big Jube's weapon centered upon him. It roared and bucked in his hand. Crosby triggered one fast shot. The two explosions sounded as one. He felt the waspish breeze of a bullet past

his cheek. Jube doubled over in the corral dust.

Matt Furness, the biggest target of them all, lumbered around the pen toward the shelter of the barn. Ed Palmer's long barreled Army Colt steadied, roared as he flipped a shot. Big Matt lurched crazily, regained his heavy stride. Palmer swore and triggered again. Furness plunged face down in the dirt, taking his dream of empire into death with him.

Crosby turned his attention on the barn. Powdersmoke swirled out of the open loft window. Again the rifle up there cracked and a bullet tugged at his shirt. This time Crosby spotted the orange burst of flame up there in the shadows. He triggered two fast slugs through the window.

A hoarse scream came from the loft, Stud Moonan would never stand trial...

The Broken Spur was host to a lot of activity during the next few months. The annexation of the Diamond F made Les Crosby the owner of the largest ranch in the state. It meant extra work for all hands. Building fences, repairing corrals, barns, starting new roundups and caring for new beef and colts.

But there was never a murmur from the crew. Who could gripe at a boss who worked and sweated with them, tackling the nastiest chores and more than his share of the dangerous ones?

And when Tex Ramsay crawled out of his sick, they had a double wedding at the ranch house. Sheriff Keefe was best man and gave Diana Crosby away to the speechless Tex. Dour Ed Palmer, still smelling of horse sweat and leather despite his starched white shirt and store-bought suit, turned Ann loose into Crosby's arms. Then he and Pat Keefe lingered over the tapped whiskey keg on the front porch.

"I ask you," Ed said a few drinks later. "How's the Army ever goin' to depend on a lovey-dovey outfit like this for any more horses?"

After a lifetime of disappointment, McClane had found gold — enough to keep him in style for the rest of his days. But McClane was just the first link in a chain of murder

GOLDEN CIRCLE

NOVEL OF DESTINY'S WEB

by Roe Richmond

McClane



IT MUST have been all in one pocket, McClane thought, as he broke camp. One freak vein of it, rich and concentrated. He had dug around it in every direction, panned up and down the headwaters of the Bitterroot, but he hadn't turned up any more gold.

Well, he had enough for himself anyway, and there was no one else for him to take care of—enough to live out the rest of his life in ease, comfort and mild luxury. McClane didn't want too much: good food and drink, clothes

and cigars, a woman now and then, time to loaf or travel. He'd probably get sick of the soft living and turn back to prospecting again, after a year or two. But whatever he did, he had enough money, for the first time in his life, in that one heavy buckskin pouch, stenciled with the name, "Mac."

He thought of his past life, as he slung and hitched gear on the pack mule. In the middle fifties now, McClane wasn't just sure of his age, but it didn't seem possible he'd put so many years behind him. He reviewed jobs he had worked at with distaste. Digging for gold was the only kind of labor he didn't mind, although he had tried about everything: farm hand, railroad worker, store clerk, hostler, freighter, bartender—he'd even served a hitch in



the army once. But he hadn't liked any job, except that of hunting gold. Didn't even mind the loneliness of it; he'd always been a loner anyway.

You couldn't trust most men, and women were worse, good for just one thing, in McClane's book. A man was better off by himself, away from towns and people, out in the open country with his thoughts, and his work, and a couple of mules. Up in the mountains where the air was clean and cool, even in midsummer heat, and the stars were close and bright at nighttime. There was danger, yes, from wild animals and Indians and outlaws; but McClane

hadn't been bothered much by any of them. There was more danger from fellow humans in the settlements, the way he saw it. Always trouble of one kind or another in the frontier towns.

I knew I'd strike it sometime, McClane thought, as he saddled up the other mule. *If a man sets himself to one thing and sticks to it, if he slaves and hopes and dreams hard enough, he's apt to get what he wants sooner or later.* The thing with most men was that they didn't know what they were after in this world. He'd seen them grab out in all different directions, wanting everything and getting nothing. To get

anywhere, you had to follow one line and keep plugging; and if you picked a line you liked, who could say you were a failure, even if you never did quite succeed? Most men hated their jobs and just went on putting in their time, never hardly knowing they were alive.

But I got away from that—after a while, I went my own way, did what I wanted to do; and now when I bring this dust in I can watch the eyes bug out of them townsfolks who said Mac was a lazy, crazy, old coot, ramming around like a fool in the hills and scrambling up just enough ore to keep himself and his mules from starving. Yes sir, they'd change their tune mighty sudden, when Mac came in with this bag of gold...

THE MULES packed and saddled and ready, McClane looked around the campsite that had been his home all these weeks. The pines were dark and gloomy, but in a good-smelling friendly way, and the aspens rippled like silver in the early sun. The Bitterroot, just a little creek up here, chuckled along its stony graveled bed. Mac's diggings showed all along the shoulder, but it didn't matter. If anybody else could find gold here, they were welcome to it. McClane had his, all he needed. Mac wasn't a hog; he didn't want the headaches that great wealth was bound to bring. Just enough to live easy and decent, without worrying and fretting; that's all McClane wanted.

Bird calls sounded from the wooded slopes around him, and suddenly McClane sensed danger. He sniffed the upland air, and keened his eyes and ears. Nothing definite to smell or see or hear, yet something was there. He could feel it up his spine and into his scalp, a cold prickly tightening. Something was there and closing in, a full menacing circle about the camp.

McClane pulled his Henry rifle from the saddle boot, and the air filled with whirring sounds and flickering shadows. The pack mule brayed and sank

to earth, bristling with feathered shafts, and savage cries yammered through the trees. The saddle mule bolted and went down under another flight of arrows, bawling in pain and terror. McClane lunged to his knees between two boulders, gripping the rifle and searching for targets. Arrows crashed and slithered off the rocks, but the attackers were still hidden from sight.

White Mountain Apaches, thought McClane. What they want to jump me for? I never harmed them or had any trouble with them. A bunch of young bucks, drunk on tiswin probably, wanting a white scalp. I can't let them get me alive. I don't want my guts and brains eaten out by ants, and I don't want to roast over a slow fire while they cut me to pieces... What a hell of a time for this to happen! If they had to hit me, why couldn't they come when I was broke?

The Indians opened up with rifles now, lead shrieking off the boulders and powdering McClane with stone-dust; he started firing back at the muzzle flashes, glimpsing fleet shadowy brown figures here and there in the woods. He didn't have a chance; he knew it, and it filled him with bitter disgust and fury. So it was just a joke, after all? They let you gather the gold, get the prize in your paws, and then they snatched it away from you. The howling of the Apaches was like the laughter of the gods in McClane's ears. All the years led up to this, and a man was left with nothing at the end of the trail, just as he had started out with nothing.

"Why do you want to kill me?" McClane snarled, in his sweaty beard. "Gold's no good to you Injuns." He went on triggering, jacking the lever, and squeezing off again. He smiled when a brave spun screaming into the mouldy carpet of needles beneath a great pine. When the Henry clicked empty, McClane reloaded with quick sure fingers, but the Apaches did not

with him. They were in no hurry this morning.

Sometime later, acting on impulse, McClane hefted the pouch of gold dust and hurled it toward the running water of Bitterroot Creek, but the bag was heavy and it fell into a little brush-grown draw short of the stream. Mac had exposed himself in throwing, and a bullet smashed his left shoulder, jarring and twisting his body. Before he could recover an arrow whipped through the right side of his body, all the way through so that the feathers were almost brushing his chest.

Numb and stricken, McClane reared upright on spraddled sagging legs, blasting away with the Henry held at his hip, the shaft jutting from his breast. He was laughing like a maniac, laughing at the irony of it all, when the slugs and arrows ripped and flung him backward, riddled and dying in the dirt beside his firepit, as the Apaches closed in screaming around him.

Forden



HE YOUNG man, well-mounted on a sorrel gelding and leading a pack horse, looked out-of-place in this mountain wilderness. He was clean-shaven for one thing, his face smoothly tanned, clear-eyed and not

unhandsome. He wore excellent boots and riding breeches, a tan shirt and brown cord jacket, and a Stetson slanted on his shapely head. There was a Colt holstered on his hip, and one of the new Winchesters in the saddle scabbard; yet he appeared foreign to this frontier.

Paul Forden had thought it would be comparatively easy for a man of his intelligence and education—a geologist—to find gold out here, but after a year of searching he was beginning to

wonder. He hadn't found enough gold to fill a tooth, and if he had depended on his prospecting for subsistence he would have starved out long ago. Fortunately he had a well-lined moneybelt, in addition to a comfortably laden wallet. Forden hated to admit defeat—the stubbornness showed in his firm mouth and lean jaws. But he was getting tired of this lonely barren game, was about ready to go home to California, enjoy a whirl of social life, and accept a position with some mining company. Forden had been a brilliant student in college, and there were several good offers to choose from.

In late afternoon he neared the headwaters of a stream, which he figured must be the Bitterroot. Premature darkness had come with the imminent threat of a storm, lightning crackling and thunder rumbling around distant peaks. It struck sooner than Forden had anticipated; he sought shelter in a narrow draw, as lightning split the sky wide open and rain poured down in torrents. Tremendous explosions seemed to rock the mountain, and nearby pines were blasted by lightning, the concussions leaving Forden blind and dazed.

He had tied the horses and crawled into his bedroll under a slicker. The initial fury of the storm was soon spent, but the rain continued. Settling down with weary resignation to a night of misery, Forden decided this was enough treasure hunting for him. He was going back to the Coast, and leave the gold—if any—where it lay. He'd had a good experience, anyway—something to tell the boys and girls about when he got home... After a few drinks of brandy from his flask, Forden was able to sleep in fitful snatches, despite the damp and cold.

Morning dawned fair and clear but still cold. Forden took a swig of brandy, rubbed down the horses, and prepared to move out to what looked like an ideal campsite. Some prospector had done plenty of digging hereabouts,

he noticed... Stumbling over an obstruction in the draw, Paul Forden looked down and saw a partly-buried buckskin bag at his feet. With an eerie sense of excitement, he unearthed the sack and saw the name, "Mac," stenciled on its wet side. Loosening the rawhide drawstrings, he examined the contents. It didn't take a geologist to tell that this was gold dust, about the richest Forden had ever seen. For some time he stared at it in stunned awe and wonder. At least \$30,000 worth, he estimated, perhaps more.

Outside of the draw, Forden picketed the horses and spread out the saddle gear and packs to dry. He was scratching for dry wood to kindle a fire, when he saw the skeleton and the arrowheads. The clothing had rotted away, except for shreds of leather and bits of metal, and the bones were picked clean.

"So this is Mac," murmured Paul Forden, with chills running along his spinal column. "Poor old Mac. He made his strike, and then the Indians got him... Before he could spend a nickel of his new fortune."

Forden dug a shallow grave and dumped the bones into them. "Least I can do for you, Mac," he said, covering the skeleton; "a man who leaves that much gold should rest in a decent grave."

AFTER STARTING a fire, Forden washed up in the creek and made breakfast. As he washed down the beans and bacon with strong hot coffee, he contemplated the story he'd tell on returning to civilization. It would be nice to claim the strike as his own, but Forden was truthful by nature and decided to stick to the facts. It was a good enough story when told straight. He wondered about the man named Mac, and visualized his lonely end here, shot to pieces and surrounded by hostile savages.

Mac had put up a fight—Forden had seen the rusted brass of shell cases

scattered around those two rocks. And out front were the bones of his two horses or mules, interlaced with decaying arrows. Forden tried to set the time of Mac's death. So far as he knew, the Apaches hadn't been out for two years, so it must have been at least that long ago. And Forden was the first visitor to this spot, since those Indians had departed with Mac's hair.

Cigar burning fragrantly in his white teeth, Paul Forden explored the area and considered prospecting it on his own. But he wasn't comfortable here; every sound brought up visions of prowling warriors, and Forden wanted to get away from this place. It had the feeling of a cemetery at midnight, and made him abruptly aware of his youth, inexperience and loneliness... He would move out at once, and follow this stream down the mountainside into the valley, and thence to the settlement of Coharie, if his geography was correct.

"So long, Mac," said Forden, as he rode out with the pack horse on lead. "Rest well, oldtimer. If you had folks anywhere that I knew of, I'd see they got a good share of this gold... But as it is, about all I can do is take a drink for you from time to time."

He felt better away from that scene, but he was still uneasy with all that dust in his saddlebags. There were men in this country who'd kill for a lot less than that—men who'd do murder for a horse and saddle, or guns and boots. Forden had seen the envy and hunger in some of those slitted eyes, when they fell upon his sorrel and the hand-tooled saddle, upon his handsome boots and gunbelt and the new Winchester. Something had held them back before, but they wouldn't hesitate if they knew he was carrying so much gold.

He was all day winding down-mountain, and darkness was welling up the lower slopes when he saw a dugout built into the hillside, with a pair of mules in the adjacent leanto shed. A gnarled old man with dirty white hair and beard emerged from under the sod

roof and hailed him: "Howdy, younker; light and rest your saddle. Datk's acomin' and I got deer meat aplenty. Ain't had no company in a coon's age, son."

Paul Forden was lonesome enough to accept the invitation at once, although the new burden in his saddlebags was a nagging discomfort. The old man peered at him, as he unsaddled and cared for the horses, pegged his saddle and equipment on the shed wall, and kept the saddlebags close at hand.

"Thought you was a dude, but I reckon you been around some," the oldtimer drawled, spitting tobacco juice with approval. "My name's Dommer, and they call me Muley. Been livin' with mules so long. Hunted gold most of my life. Never found enough to brag of. Hunt more for game now. Somethin' you can eat anyway."

Forden gave his own name and shook hands. Muley Dommer looked rough, tough as a knot, but kindly and humorous. His faded eyes twinkled and his smile was easy and friendly. When Forden produced a bottle, the old man's face lighted up, and he got out two clean tin cups. They sat down with their backs against the log wall, sipping the liquor and watching the daylight darken into night. When they went inside, Forden took his saddlebags.

AFTER A couple more drinks and a fine meal of venison steak, they washed up the dishes together and were quite close and friendly. With Forden's cigars going well, they sat down in homemade barrel chairs and talked of this and that by lamplight. Forden explained that he was a geologist, out looking the country over for a mining company.

"Ain't no gold or silver hereabouts, son," Dommer declared. "If they was, I sure hell would of rooted it out afore now. Left a family back east in Ioway. Allus wanted to hit it rich for them, 'cause I sure never done nothin' else to help 'em. But I never hit it, so I

reckon I'll never git back home again. Ain't goin' empty-handed, after all these years."

In spite of himself, Forden glanced at his saddlebags occasionally, and a shrewd gleam came into Muley Dommer's sunken eyes. He said: "Son, you act like a man who's made a strike of some kind. I seen 'em before, lots of 'em, and it allus shows up. It ain't an easy thing to hide nohow. You found somethin' up the mountain, didn't you, boy? You're packin' somethin' in them bags, ain't you, son?" His interest was friendly, guileless, but somehow persistent.

Forden's cheeks burned under the tan, as if he'd been caught lying or cheating. Dommer seemed to *know* his secret, and Forden felt irrationally ashamed for holding out on the generous oldtimer. He was a poor liar, at best, and too embarrassed now to formulate any deception. Silently Forden cursed himself for ever stopping here, and knew that loneliness had betrayed him. He didn't believe there was any harm or greed left in Muley Dommer; yet the presence of the gold, practically acknowledged now, changed everything in that rude one-room shack.

"Well, I did find a pouch of dust up there," Forden admitted, smiling awkwardly. "Up near the headwaters of this creek, Muley. Skeleton of a man and two mules nearby, evidently killed by Indians."

Dommer's eyes were all aflame now. "Mind if I jest peek at it, son? I give up huntin' it myself, lost my itch for it; but I'd sure like to see some dust once more. Jest one look, boy. I ain't got no designs on it neither."

With stiff reluctant fingers, Paul Forden unlatched the saddlebags and withdrew the heavy buckskin pouch. The old man gazed at the name on it. "That'd be Mac McClane. Disappeared in the mountains two-three years back. Ain't that fate, though? Struck it good and then lost his hair."

They studied the ore together, feeling it and swapping comments on it, and Muley Dommer estimated its value at better than \$30,000. "Put it away, son," he said, at length. "It ain't good for a man to look too long at that stuff. Kinda dazzlin' and blindin' on the eyes."

"You want some of it, Muley?" asked Forden, uncertainly.

"Me? Hell, no, I ain't got no use for gold. Too late for me, son." Dommer laughed hoarsely, coughing and clearing his throat. "Why should you give me any of it, boy? You found it; it's all your'n. Mac ain't needin' it, where he's gone to."

"Did he have any people?"

Muley Dommer shook his shaggy white head. "Not that I know of, son. Never talked about nobody back home. Jest a lone-wolf prospector like me. Mac struck it and he's dead. I never did, and I'm alive... Reckon that makes me a mite luckier'n Mac, don't it?"

But after Paul Forden put the pouch away, the good feeling was gone from them, the easy friendliness no longer held them warm and relaxed and comfortable. There was a strain, a tension in the hut. The gold lay between them like a double-edged blade, a barrier of cold-steel enmity. The hatred that always comes, Forden thought regretfully, between a man who has and a man who has not... And he wished he had never stumbled upon that bag of gold.

They finished the bottle, but the warmth and pleasure had vanished. Forden said he'd just as soon sleep outside, but Dommer insisted on his using the extra bunk. Not wanting to hurt the old man's feelings, Forden agreed and arranged his blankets on the rawhide slung bed across the room from Dommer's bunk.

EVEN WITH the brandy in them and the lamp out, they could not

get to sleep, lying hushed and restless, listening to one another's breathing and stirring around.

Why should that young squirt blunder onto a fortune like that? Muley Dommer thought, with growing bitterness. I spend all my life grubbing for the damn stuff, and he comes out here in fancy clothes on a thoroughbred horse and falls right into all that gold. Gold that old McClane sweated and slaved and died for... I could go home in style, if I had that. It would put my folks on easy street for the rest of their days. They never had nothing, and I never had nothing. This kid has always had everything he wanted; he don't need that money, by gawd, and I do...

I don't want to hurt him. He's a nice enough younker... If I could just bat him over the head, knock him out long enough to get away with that pouch, he'd never find me. Nobody could ever run me down in these hills... When he gets to sleep, I'll try it. Not to hurt the kid, but I got to have that gold. It's my last chance, the only one left, and I can't let it go... I got to have that gold.

Muley Dommer pretended to sleep and snore a little, and before long he knew from Forden's breathing that the boy was asleep. Carefully Dommer reached under the bunk for his long-barreled pistol. *I won't hit him too hard*, he thought. *Just enough to put him out...* Dommer could see in the darkness, and he knew how to move with the silent stealth of an Indian scout.

He got up and crossed the room without a sound, measuring the distance and swinging the gun-barrel at the boy's tousled head. But he didn't strike with sufficient force; Paul Forden woke up snorting and rolling away, clawing his Colt out of the blankets. Muley Dommer stepped in close and chopped again with the barrel, much harder this time, feeling the shock way up his arm, and the bone

giving in under the steel. The breath sighed out of Paul Forden, and he went slack and empty in the bunk, blood streaming down his fine features.

Muley Dommer groaned aloud: "Oh, gawd, I killed him! I never meant to, but he's dead; I felt his skull go..." Sick and shaking, the old man crouched over the saddlebags that held McClane's gold dust, and wished he'd never set eyes on the stuff, or on that dead boy in the twisted blankets.

But it was done, and there was no turning back. He'd have to bury the kid up in the woods, and turn loose his horses. Take the dust and pull out of this country, and head home to Iowa and the family he'd deserted many years before.

Dommer



RIDING one mule and leading the other, Dommer approached Coharie in the mellow lavender dusk, well-fortified with brandy taken from Forden's supplies. It had been a shame to let those horses go, especially

the sorrel with that elegant saddle on, but Muley Dommer was too smart to run the risk of keeping those animals. He would have enjoyed making a grand entrance on the sorrel, but it might have been fatal to do so. Certainly it would have attracted a lot of attention, which was one thing Muley wanted to avoid. He had taken the boy's Colt and Winchester—couldn't afford to pass up weapons like that. But horses were another thing; in this country, men remembered horses much better than they did men.

Muley Dommer should have felt safe and secure, particularly with that fine brandy glowing inside him, but somehow he did not. He kept craning his neck for a look at the backtrail, as

if he expected to see Forden, or McClane, or a whole posse coming up behind him. They wouldn't find the kid's body for years, if ever, and when the horses were picked up it wouldn't cause much alarm, because Paul Forden had been a stranger in this territory. Just another greenhorn come to grief in the wilderness. But if Dommer had ridden into town on that sorrel, it would have set plenty of tongues wagging and stirred up all kinds of suspicion. People were used to seeing old Dommer on a mule; so he'd stay on a mule, even if he *was* a rich man now.

If it hadn't been for going home to Iowa, Muley Dommer might have figured on making a big splurge in Coharie, but the homecoming he planned made this cowtown seem like small potatoes, not hardly worth hurrahing. And besides, there was a feeling of guilt in Dommer, that felt as if it must be visible to anyone who looked at him—just as it seemed as if the gold showed burning bright through those saddlebags. So, all things considered, Muley Dommer was content to play meek and mild in this settlement, and do his strutting, blowing and celebrating after he was back home.

He still felt rotten mean over killing the kid; he hadn't intended to, and it left a sour dismal taste in him, but it couldn't be helped now. Once Forden was awake, he had to die, or he would have killed Muley. It was Muley's soft-heartedness that made it go wrong, in the first place; he had hit the boy too easy that first lick, and on that account he'd had to kill the kid. Muley Dommer didn't like to think about that, but it kept coming back to him. Even the brandy couldn't burn it out of his head.

Well, this was a rough country, and a tenderfoot ramming around alone in it was lucky to stay alive as long as Paul Forden had. If Muley hadn't taken him, somebody else would have in due time. A lone kid like that was doomed on this frontier, especially

when he had a fortune in gold dust riding with him. Muley tried to feel that he was simply an innocent instrument of fate in the matter. He drank to that, in the dead man's brandy, but it wasn't wholly convincing.

HE WAS GLAD to see a light in the assayer's office, and he hoped Aronson would have cash enough on hand to buy all the dust tonight. Muley Dommer had the story he was going to tell all set in his mind, as he pulled in and stepped down to tie the mules at the rack. Under the dark overhang. Muley saw the lanky form of Vic Skeel lounging against the wall. Seemed like Skeel was hanging around this office every time Muley came to town.

"Another big strike, Muley?" asked Skeel, his huge nose and buck-toothed mouth showing as he puffed on a cigarette.

"Enough for a bottle and some grub, Vic," said Dommer, wondering what that long ugly vulture did for a living, besides gamble and steal and roll drunks.

"You'll hit it yet, Muley," jeered Vic Skeel. "Twenty-thirty more years and you'll strike it rich."

Dommer squirted tobacco juice in his direction, and stomped into the office. Aronson looked up from behind the counter, his pale fat face green from the eyeshade he wore, frayed-cigar stub drooping from his flabby lips.

"Hello, Muley," he greeted. "Haven't seen you in a long time. Got something good for us, old man?"

"Dust I been savin' along," Muley Dommer said, setting the pouch on the wood and tugging the strings open, the side stenciled "Mac" facing himself.

Aronson dipped into it, and his eyes widened with interest. "Where'd you strike this, Muley? You really got something, man!"

"It ain't one strike," Dommer said patiently; "it's a lot of little ones through the years. I worked hard at it

and saved, and now I want to cash in and git back home."

"It's almost pure, Muley."

"Because I panned and sifted it so much all the waste is gone," Dommer said.

Aronson scanned him narrowly. "You sure you haven't hit something new, Muley?"

Dommer sighed and scratched his white whiskers. "Cross my heart, hope to die. You want to buy that dust, Aronson?"

"I haven't got the cash tonight. First thing in the morning I'll take it, Muley; you can leave it in the safe overnight."

"I ain't leavin' it nowhere," Dommer said. "Weigh out fifty dollars and pay me for that. I'll come back in the mornin'."

"It isn't safe to pack that around this town, Muley," said Aronson, adjusting his scales. "Let me stick it in the safe for you—or put it in the hotel safe, if you don't trust it here."

Dommer wagged his white head. "Gimme the fifty and I'll see you tomorrow." He had Forden's cash, but he wouldn't use it in Coharie.

Aronson counted out the gold pieces, and Dommer drew the strings tight on the pouch. As Dommer pocketed the cash, Aronson's eyes flicked over his shoulder toward the front windows. Dommer turned to look, but the windows were dark and blank. He picked up the pouch and turned away, feeling Aronson's gaze follow him out the door.

Unwrapping the reins from the rail, Dommer led the mules along the street and turned into a dark alley leading to the livery barn, left hand holding the reins, right hand swinging near the Colt that had been Paul Forden's.

A slight sound brought Muley Dommer wheeling to the right and grabbing at the gun, but he never got it clear of the leather. Metal shimmered wickedly as a tall figure closed in and struck; Muley Dommer glimpsed the beaked toothy face of Vic Skeel as the blade

drove deep into his chest, way to the hilt. His heart seemed to burst scaldingly; his lungs flooded full and hot, and his old legs melted underneath him. The ground rushed up and smashed him full length, and blood poured through his beard into the gritty dirt under his face. The hoofbeats of running mules were far away in the night.

So gold gets you this? Muley Dommer thought, in his last fleeting instant of consciousness and life. It didn't do Mac no good, and it didn't do the kid no good, and it sure hell ain't going to help me any now... 'Cause I'm as dead as they are, and loway's just a long lost dream.

Skeel



NOW I CAN have that woman, Vic Skeel thought, skulking through the dark backlots of Coharie with the buckskin pouch heavy in under his arm. *That high-headed cold-eyed ripe-mouthed woman, who calls*

herself Ursula, with the big bosom and strong hips and long lovely legs. Now I can buy her, own her body and soul, although she's got no more soul than an Apache squaw at the torture. There's enough gold here to take her away from Reno Capen, that fancy kept man of hers. She'll never laugh and sneer at Vic Skeel again; not after she sees this bag of dust.

Here's one haul I don't split with Aronson, decided Skeel. This time I'm holding the whip. Before, with the dust in his safe, Aronson bossed the show, and he always short-changed me on my end of the take. This time I got the dust, and I'm keeping the whole works, and to hell with Fat Lips Aronson.

This wealth was Victor Skeel's belated compensation for being born scarecrow lank and atrociously evil in

appearance—so ugly that even the cheapest and hungriest of honkytonk girls were inclined to shy away from him. Not to mention Ursula, the haughtiest and highest-priced of her kind in Coharie. He didn't care about the others, but Skeel meant to have Ursula. It had become an obsession with him. She was all the women in the world wrapped up in one voluptuous body.

Ursula had her own suite over the Rose Garden, the premier palace of pleasure in these parts. Skeel never had set foot in her fabulous quarters, but he would take over the place tonight—because no matter how much money that woman had made, she was always greedy for more. That was the one thing that Skeel understood in her: the endless greed.

Vic Skeel wasn't worried over the knifing of Muley Dommer. Dead men were no novelty in this community, and most of them died violently at the hands of unknown assailants. There was law in Coharie—a town marshal and deputies—but in general, men were supposed to protect themselves and their rights. The old frontier code still prevailed; every man went armed, and relied on his own weapons and nerve, speed and skill. The law of the jungle favored the strong and the sly, and had little sympathy for the weak and inept... No one in Coharie was going to be perturbed by the stabbing of a poor old prospector like Muley Dommer.

The only thing Skeel had to fear was Aronson, and because of previous dealings with Skeel, the hands of the assayer were pretty well tied.

But this town no longer mattered to Victor Skeel. Dragging on his left arm was the means of taking Ursula and getting out of the Bitterroot Valley, once and forever. There was no limit on where they might travel from this point. Skeel had vague visions of far-away glittering cities and luxurious hotels, romantic backgrounds for Ursula

and himself. . . He stumbled over odorous rubble in an alley, and kicked tin cans aside with a jangling clatter.

COMING out in back of the gaudy Rose Garden, he paused to listen to the music and laughter. Skeel was tempted to swagger in and set up drinks for the house, but he realized the senseless folly of such an exhibition. What did he care about the people in there? Ursula was the one he wanted to impress. . . Skeel mounted the outside staircase to her apartment and knocked on the door, made bold and arrogant by the pouch of paydirt.

Ursula opened the door, her head lifting with disdain, eyes and lips contemptuous at the sight of him. "What do you want here, Shark?" Lamplight gleamed on her dyed golden hair, and outlined her firm full-curved figure in the silk dressing gown.

Vic Skeel held up the buckskin bag. "Look what I got for you. Fifty thousand in raw gold, Ursula."

Her incredulous look faded slowly, as she stared at the pouch. "You're drunk or crazy—or both. Don't try any tricks on me, Shark; I'll have Reno kill you."

"It's gold, real gold," Skeel insisted. "Lemme show you."

Ursula's greed overruled her judgment. "Come on in; I'll take a look, and you'd better be telling the truth." She shut and bolted the door behind him, and Skeel surveyed the plush overfurnished parlor he had dreamed about so often.

"Open it up," Ursula said impatiently. Skeel did so, and the woman's eyes widened and glowed with surprise and interest; she knew gold dust when she saw it. "Where'd you get it, Vic? Who'd you steal it off?"

Skeel cackled with laughter. "I found it, baby."

"Don't gimme that! You killed somebody for this. Tell me the truth, Vic."

"What if I did, Ursula? It's all yours, if you'll go away with me."

"Who did you kill?" she demanded coldly.

Skeel gestured. "Just an old crock of a prospector; there won't be no trouble."

"What about Aronson?"

"What about him?" Skeel laughed. "He can't talk. He's in too deep himself."

Ursula's hard handsome features were thoughtful, brooding. "Sit down, Vic; you want a drink?"

"I want you," Skeel said flatly, madened by the perfumed nearness of her, the full blown flesh swelling that sheer robe.

Ursula smiled at him, as she never had before. "Later, Vic," she murmured, her eyes and mouth promising future delights. "First we'll drink together, and talk things over."

Skeel nodded dully, throat dry and constricted, and Ursula went after the drinks. She was as good as his; she couldn't resist that much gold, as he had expected.

Ursula came back with two tall glasses and handed him one. "The first one fast; the second slow. To us and our gold, Vic. Drink up!"

They drained the glasses together. The drink was gone before Vic Skeel realized that it didn't taste quite right. He remembered hearing rumors about Ursula's using poison on certain men in the past. Sweat broke out all over him, and his stomach contracted spasmodically. His head began to reel, and his vision blurred and fogged.

"What was in that?" Skeel gasped, a gripping searing pain already convulsing him.

"What on earth are you talking about? Maybe you aren't used to good liquor." Ursula smiled tolerantly at him, crossing her long silken legs and lounging back at ease on the sofa.

Skeel knew now that he was poisoned, dying, and horror filled him as the agony spread like acid in his vitals.

He heaved himself erect, stark and rigid, a streaming mist before his bulging eyes. "You," he panted. "You—" And tried to reach his holstered gun, but paralysis gripped him, his muscles failed to respond.

Ursula rose and faced him across the room, a small pistol in her hand and all the old contempt back in her face. "There isn't enough gold in the West for you to buy me, Shark," she said, with biting scorn. "But thanks for trying. Reno and I can use that dust."

Torn in two and groaning, Vic Skeel lunged at her, breaking in the middle and falling to his knees. Swaying there helpless, breath rasping in and out, Skeel stared at her with tortured eyes going glazed and blind.

Ursula smiled at him. "Is this what you wanted, Sharkface?" With indolent grace she opened the filmy gown.

Ursula turned away to summon her man, Reno Capen, and have him take the body out and dump it somewhere well away from the Rose Garden. Then she and Reno had better move out of Coharie at once, before Aronson started tracing this bag of gold dust, with the help of the law. Add the gold to what Ursula had saved, and they could travel wherever they wished, and always first class.

But to get out of this country in a hurry, they'd have to ride horseback to the nearest railhead. Ursula didn't care much for riding, although it was preferable to the stagecoach; but she could stand a few days of it.

She never thought of concealing from Reno Capen any part of her newly-acquired wealth; anything and everything she had was his. Like most women of her type, Ursula took everything she could from the rest of mankind, in order to give it all to the man of her choice... That was one of the many things that Vic Skeel had not understood about her.

Waiting for Reno, she looked at the stenciled letters on the rawhide pouch

and wondered who Mac had been. She had known a lot of men called Mac, and perhaps she had entertained this one right here over the Garden. Not that his identity made much difference.

How many men do you suppose have died over this poke of gold? Ursula mused idly. Two recently, perhaps this same night, Skeel's victim and then Skeel himself. And how many others before?... A sudden thought turned her cold and shivering: *How many will die over it in the future?*

But that was silly. She and Reno had it now, and they would guard it well and use it wisely, enjoy it to the utmost. They had love and each other and a fortune to spend, and the world was their playground.

Ursula



THEY WERE on the trail at sunrise, well out of Coharie and following the southeasterly course of the Bitterroot. Wearing range garb, mounted on two good broncs, and leading a pack horse. They had arranged

with the owner of the Rose Garden to ship their things to them later. The body of Muley Dommer had been found, but the corpse of Vic Skeel lay undiscovered in the crumbling, abandoned shanty where Reno Capen had deposited it.

Neither of them had any regrets at leaving Coharie, but Reno did not like their mode of departure, sneaking out like thieves in the night. He had killed, himself, on occasion, but he didn't approve of Ursula's killing Skeel. The man's life meant little or nothing, but it showed how utterly cruel and ruthless the woman was. She had poisoned Skeel as she would a coyote, and the time might come when Ursula would

fire of Capen and get rid of him in similar fashion. Unless he broke with her, or beat her to it.

Reno Capen was a medium-sized man, neat, trim, immaculate, and well-mannered. A good-looking man with straight clean features, magnetic and expressive eyes, and a thin mustache above his pleasant charming mouth. Something of a dude, yet there was a streak of toughness in him. A cool daring gambler, quick and sure with a pistol. Nobody pushed Capen around, or spoke of him as a kept man in Capen's presence. The slurs and insults came when Capen was out of hearing.

Work of any kind bored him, and Capen had lived off women all his life. He had been weary of Ursula for some time, but she supported him far better than anyone else ever had, and Capen was reluctant to leave such a soft easy berth. At moments he was half-afraid of the woman, though; she was colder, tougher and meaner than any man.

The sun rose in fiery splendor above the eastern ramparts, and the mist raveled away like white cotton over the river, blurring the cottonwoods and willows along the banks. Sharp-profiled buttes and mesas took on flaming colors in the early sunshine, and the broken valley stretched in wild barbaric beauty to the western mountains. Ursula turned in her saddle and smiled gayly at Capen.

"Wonderful to be alive on a morning like this, isn't it?"

He nodded glumly, thinking of old Muley Dommer under a tarp on the loading platform behind the furniture store, and of Vic Skeel in that mouldering shack at the edge of town.

"What's the matter, Reno?" she chided; "you don't look very happy."

"Murder never makes me particularly happy," Capen said.

Ursula laughed. "You're getting scruples, all of a sudden? I can remember a few men you've put under."

"It wasn't murder," Reno Capen said. "It's one thing to shoot a man in

a fair standup fight; it's another to poison him like a dog."

"Don't go noble on me, Reno," she said, gesturing disgustedly. "It's a little late to put on that act, and it's not becoming in a man they refer to as a..."

Capen smiled wryly as he interrupted. "Let's not start calling names, Ursula; you'd be at a decided disadvantage in that field."

Ursula tossed her yellow head. "I am what I am, and you live off it, mister; that makes you lower than anything you could call me!"

"Don't say anything you'll regret, Ursula," warned Capen. "This is a bad way to start out on a new life, my dear."

"I don't want to fight with you, darling. You started it, you know."

"I'm sorry, Ursula," said Reno Capen. "We won't quarrel; we can't afford to."

"That's more like the man I love," Ursula cried approvingly. "Now smile for me, Reno. I just adore you when you smile that smile of yours."

Reno Capen smiled obediently, with automatic ease and charm, but the look in his deep eyes did not match the winning curve of his lips.

We're getting near the breaking point, he thought somberly. I'll begin to suspect poison in every drink she mixes me, before long now. I ought to leave her; I should have pulled out months ago. But we'll never come to a friendly parting; she'll never let me go without a violent scene. She might even use that small pistol on me, if she didn't get a chance to slip the lethal dose into my glass. This woman is more dangerous, more deadly, than any man I ever faced through gun-smoke.

THERE WAS no love left on his side, nothing but habit, and he wondered how much real love she could retain for him. What Ursula actually worshipped, of course, was wealth. The

gold in the weathered buckskin sack, that some old miner named Mac had starved and sweated and worked his fingers raw for. She had enough money of her own, without killing Skeel to get that bag of dust. That had been a mistake, bad for both of them. They couldn't go on, with that gold forever between them, corroding and widening the already broad breach in their relationship.

"I wish you hadn't done that last night, Ursula," said Reno Capen.

She laughed lightly. "We can always pour the gold out, throw it away. If it's going to be on your conscience, Reno."

"Don't be childish."

"You're the one that's being childish!" Ursula flared. "Come out of it; I can't stomach much more of that sanctimonious stuff from a specimen like you, Capen."

"All right, all right, forget it," he said dully.

After riding in silence for some distance, Ursula unscrewed the cap of her canteen and raised it to her mouth, immediately spitting out the brackish water. "I need a rest and I want some fresh water," she said, angling off toward the Bitterroot. Capen drifted after her, leading the pack animal.

Tying the horses in a clump of salt cedars, they carried their canteens down the shelving sandy bank to the edge of the stream. "I'll get some for you," Capen offered, but Ursula was already down on her hands and knees.

"Always liked to drink out of a creek," she said. "Remember when I was a little girl, we used to drink from a brook in the meadow..." Hands on rocks, body arched with boots on shore, Ursula lowered her face into the cool running water.

Standing behind her, Reno Capen looked down at that bright head and familiar figure, the well-known but no longer loved body, and something snapped in his brain like a flash of heat lightning. Dropping his canteen,

he crouched forward over her extended form, and his hands closed on the back of her neck, pressing her face deep into the current.

Ursula struggled and thrashed about with the strength of a maddened creature, but Capen kept his hold with increasing pressure until her entire head was submerged. Lashing back with spurred heels, she gaffed his legs with the steel rowels, and the pain sent anger and hatred racing through him like flame. With a savage snarl Capen thrust her face down against the sandy pebbled bottom, and held her there until the last feeble movement died in her drenched body. Long after life had left her, Capen kept her pinned beneath the surface.

Then, catching her roughly by arm-pit and belt, Capen heaved her out into deeper water, and stood shocked and panting in the shallows, watching her float downstream and bump against sleek wet boulders, her golden hair sodden darkly and spreading like seaweed on the rippled stream.

"Now what the hell?" he whispered, suddenly horrified, wondering why he had done it.

Numb and frozen, like a man encased in ice, Reno Capen moved upstream and filled both canteens. Walking back to the horses, he transferred the pouch of gold dust and the bulk of Ursula's savings from her saddlebags to his own. He untied her horse and drove it off, before mounting his black and taking up the lead rope.

Slanting back toward the wagon road, Reno Capen jogged on down the long valley toward the next town of Dalmyra. He could still see Ursula drifting down the Bitterroot. He felt cold and hollow and terribly alone, and he wanted to get drunk, and stay drunk, and never sober up again.

He had wanted to be free of Ursula, and now that he was—it left nobody in the world for him. No one that cared, nobody that mattered. Reno Capen

was all alone, he felt scared sick as a kid in that terrifying loneliness.

He wondered how far she would float down the river, and shuddered at the thought of her drifting into Dalmyra ahead of him. But no, that was impossible; she'd soon sink to the bottom, with all that water in her lungs...

Capen



HE WAS DRUNK in Dalmyra. He had been drunk for days and nights beyond recall, losing everything in a maze of glittering bottles, glasses and backbar mirrors. In the blare of hurdygurdy music, and the laughter of dancehall girls, the slap of cards, click of wheels, and swirling clouds of tobacco smoke. Yet through it all, Reno Capen somehow stayed immaculate and clean, washed and shaven, courteous and gentlemanly. Some part of him remained sober and aloof, haunted and fearful, untouched by the whiskey.

Capen hadn't used any of the gold dust yet, but he spent money like a drunken sailor on shore leave after a year at sea. This won him a sort of following and certain amount of protection—undoubtedly helping to keep him out of serious trouble during the spree. Drinking companions grew fond of him, as well as his money, and sheltered him from other leeches, spongers and thieves, not to mention the law. Percentage girls were attracted to him, and warded off the more unscrupulous of their sisters in the trade.

Along with these factors, there was that sober detached segment of Capen's nature, which kept him alert and ready, even in the depths of intoxication. He never staggered or became incoherent, and something told observers that the lowlung bone-handled Colt he wore

was no ornament. Thus, through all the revelry and drunken madness, Reno Capen neither landed in jail nor was found beat up and robbed in a back alley.

He ate at odd moments—enough to keep himself alive and going—and he drank himself to sleep every night in his hotel room, consuming incredible quantities of liquor in private, after the public drinking was finished in the late hours. But he couldn't escape for long from Ursula. Sooner or later, she always came back to him.

Capen's days in Dalmyra followed the same pattern. Along toward noon he awoke in burning agony, nerves tortured raw and jittery. After a few drinks he was composed and strong enough to go to the barber shop for a shave and a bath. Several drinks later he was able to partake of some nourishment—soup at least, a little solid food if he felt up to it. Then Capen settled down, usually in the *Silver Horn*, for an afternoon of drinking, talking and gambling. Sometimes in the late afternoon he went up to the room of a girl called Dolly and took a nap, often with Dolly holding his hand to soothe him into slumber.

Dolly was dark of hair and eye, and wholly infatuated with Reno Capen; he wouldn't look at a blonde woman, any more than he would enter the saloon known as the *Gold Strike*.

Early in the evening, after a few stiff bracing slugs of whiskey, Capen generally tried to eat a full meal, and then went back to a night of drinking, dancing, gambling, and merrymaking. He was like a man bent on destroying himself, but he seemed almost indestructible. Capen was gay and laughing in his cups, yet he was obviously the most miserably unhappy man in Dalmyra. Once, when a drunken roust about mouthed something about "drowning his sorrow," Capen knocked the man down.

"I don't like that expression," Capen said solemnly, and set about bringing

the poor fellow to, and pressing into his hand more money than the drifter had seen in years...

On this afternoon Capen was sitting at a table in the *Silver Horn*, with Dolly and three other drinking partners, when a tall slim young man came in with an easy natural swagger. A blond boy with cold gray eyes, a warm friendly smile, and a lean reckless face. He packed two guns in low tied-down sheaths, and men made way for him with considerable deference and respect. "Kid Hewlett," someone murmured.

RENO CAPEN, in one of his rarely ugly moods, regarded the newcomer with instant dislike and scorn. "Who's that?" he demanded. "The local bad man? A two-bit gunny who's got this town treed?"

"Kid Hewlett," volunteered a companion. "He ain't a bad boy, but he's had to burn down a few men here and there. Now somebody's always callin' him out, forcin' a fight on him. You seen it happen before. A kid gets a reputation, and they won't leave him alone."

"What does he do besides shoot people?" inquired Capen, with mild contempt.

"Rides for Currycomb, old man Chalmers' spread. A good hand, they say."

"A little currying might do him a lot of good," Reno Capen said, eyes still fixed on the Kid. "I don't like his face, and I don't like that pretty hair of his."

"Don't do nothin' crazy now, Reno," protested the man at his side. "Hewlett's hellfire with a Colt gun."

"Maybe I am too, Bill," said Capen.

"Don't doubt you are, Reno," muttered Bill. "But you been on the bottle pretty heavy for a long spell. It don't help a man none in a gunfight."

"It annoys me to see these young sprouts strutting around hung with guns and spoiling for trouble," Capen declared, staring at the blond boy while

the thing built up blazing in his alcohol-hazed mind.

"Cut it out, Reno," protested Dolly, clutching at his sleeve. "You're the one that's spoiling for trouble today, and it's not like you to act this way. Come on up to the room and sleep it off, Reno."

"Shut up," Capen told her. "I don't like blond hair—on men or women—and that young bucko needs taking down a peg or two."

With that Reno Capen got up and sauntered over to the bar, easing in beside young Hewlett. "They tell me you're pretty tough," he said.

Hewlett grinned and shook his head. "Not me, mister."

"You're carrying a lot of iron; maybe you'd like to practice with it."

Hewlett's boyish face hardened. "Beat it, mister. I don't want any ruckus here; take a walk for yourself."

"I don't take orders from punks like you," Capen said. "What makes you fight, sonny, a slap in the face?"

"I don't fight drunks," Kid Hewlett said, turning away and leaning his elbows on the bar, rangy back toward Capen.

Rage and fury erupted in Reno Capen, burning away all sense and reason. He drew and slashed the barrel across the back of that high fair head, crumpling the hat and dropping Hewlett unconscious at the base of the bar.

Men surged toward Capen, but his leveled Colt held them off, as he backed downward. Somebody said: "You'd better git out, and you'd better keep goin', brother; if you're here when the Kid comes to, you're a dead man!"

Reno Capen backed until he felt the batwings at his shoulders, and then turned out through them and cut across the street toward the hotel. *I must be going crazy, he thought. Just looking at that hair, hair like Ursula's only it isn't dyed and bleached... The liquor's really getting me. I'd better pull out of here, and fast.*

The gold dust was in the safe behind the lobby desk. The clerk got it out for him, and Capen settled his bill and carried the pouch upstairs. In his room he put it in the saddlebags, packed his things hastily, and went downstairs and out of the hotel. He had enough whiskey with him, he figured, to last until the next town.

Capen turned down the drive toward the stable behind the hotel, and he had nearly reached the open arch of the barn when that voice came to him; "Turn around, mister; I want you to see this coming."

RENO CAPEN wheeled slowly, saddlebags hanging in his left hand, and saw Kid Hewlett standing there in the long purple shadows of late afternoon. The Kid hadn't drawn, and Capen knew then that he was going to die here. It didn't seem to matter much, yet he was chilled and hollow with fear. "I'm sorry, Kid," he said. "I don't know why—I was drunk, I guess."

"You knew what you were doing," Hewlett said. "Reach for it now."

"No, no, don't kill me." The words spewed out of their own accord, startling Capen, who had never expected to hear himself begging before any man. "I've got gold here." He held out the saddlebags. "Fifty thousand in gold dust. You can have it; take it—but don't shoot me."

Kid Hewlett laughed softly. "No-body gunwhips me, mister; go for your gun."

The saddlebags fell from Capen's left hand, and he nerved himself to draw, but there was no courage, no nerve and guts left in him. He was empty, weak and helpless, trembling like a leaf in the wind... His right hand moved, slow and awkward and groping, and flame leaped at him in a roaring blast. The slug smashed him backward, but he caught his balance and teetered there on his heels. Then he lurched forward, the ground slam-

ming up at his face, and he felt gravel under his cheek and his palms, and a great spreading numbness in his body.

But he wasn't dead, or even dying, and suddenly he wanted to die more than anything else in the world. He tried to speak, but no words came at first. Finally he got it out: "Kill me, Kid; finish me."

Hewlett shook his head and holstered his gun. "I'll take a look at your gold, mister, but I won't shoot you again." He came forward and opened the saddlebags, hauling out the buckskin pouch with a low whistle of amazement. Hewlett whistled again when the drawstrings were loosened. "Damned if you haven't got gold. Hell's own amount of it!"

"Take it," panted Reno Capen, lips writhing against the dirt. "You can have it. But kill me—before you go."

"You don't want that dust?"

"No, I don't want it. I just want to die."

Kid Hewlett frowned, in thoughtful perplexity. "Well, I'll take the gold off your hands; but I can't kill you—this way."

Reno Capen sobbed and cursed at him, squirming in helpless shock on the earth, and footsteps were beginning to pound in their direction, accompanied by hoarse questioning voices.

Kid Hewlett kicked Capen's gun closer to him. "Shoot yourself if you're so set on it, mister." He strode away laughing with the bag of gold dust, and to Capen it was the mocking laughter of the drowned Ursula.

After a while Reno Capen found and cocked his Colt, but he could not shoot himself. His head dropped back into the dirt, and he lay there weeping in hopeless bitter disgust, while the boots thudded nearer in the dusk.

I can't even get out of it by dying, Reno Capen thought. I've got to stay and suffer through the years, with Ur-

sula watching me forever from the shadows.

He gave no thought to the gold, beyond being glad that it was gone. There was an evil curse on that pouch of dust. It brought death or ruination to everyone who touched it. Capen wondered how far the Kid would get before it struck him down.

Hewlett



ALTHOUGH he had planned on a night in town, Kid Hewlett saddled up and rode out before Capen could change his mind and report the gold dust stolen. There'd be no charges over the shooting scrape, for thirty persons had seen Capen pistol-whip Hewlett in the *Silver Horn*, and a man wasn't supposed to stand that kind of treatment in this country. But there would be charges, if Capen informed the law that Hewlett had swiped this pouch.

Somehow the Kid didn't think Capen would report it, but he wasn't taking any chances. Apparently Capen was a little crazy, from drink or something else. He'd seemed as anxious to get rid of that gold, as he was to get himself killed. . . . Well, Hewlett didn't mind taking charge of the paydirt for him. Fifty thousand dollars worth, the man had said, and there must be close to that amount anyway. To a thirty-a-month cowhand, that was all the money in the world, and the Kid still couldn't believe his good fortune. He could buy a ranch and stock of his own, marry Marsha and live like a king now. It was just too good to be true.

Maybe it was just as well that he hadn't stayed in town, for he might have got drunk and tangled up with Dolly or some of those percentage

girls, and he didn't want to be unfaithful to Marsha—not any more. He'd sewn enough wild oats to last three-four lifetimes, and he was ready to settle down and be a family man, work his own spread and quit sky-hooting around the country.

No more gunfighting either, if he could help it. He'd had to kill that mescal-drunk Mexican named Chacos, who was running amok down in Titusville, and that had started the whole thing. A caballero friend of Chacos came gunning for him, and after Hewlett downed him he had himself a reputation. There was always some drifting gunny or liquored-up cowboy who wanted to make you live up to your rep, and Hewlett had been prodded into killing three Americans, and wounding four more, including that one today.

That was enough and more, and he was through with gunfighting, if he had his way. It led nowhere except to jail or Boothill. Eventually somebody was bound to beat your draw, or plug you in the back, or bushwhack you on the trail. If you didn't happen to die that way, you most likely wound up behind bars or with a noose on your neck. So he'd forget the guns and work cattle, build up his own brand and raise a family with Marsha, live the way his folks had always hoped and prayed he would get around to living—before it was too late.

Hewlett was glad he hadn't killed that drunk this afternoon, but a man couldn't take a public gun-whipping without coming back. His head still ached from that blow, and every jolt of the saddle sent brighter pains skyrocketing through his skull.

It was too late to ride way back to the Currycomb that night, so Kid Hewlett made camp and cooked supper and bedded down in the open, with the buckskin bag and his Colt close beside him in the blankets. In the morning he'd ride on to the ranch and give up his job, pack his warbag and

head on into Titusville to give Marsha the good news. It was like something in a dream or a storybook to Kid Hewlett.

"Now, Mac," he drawled, fondling the buckskin pouch, "I don't know where you came from, who dug you up, how many lives you've cost, or anything about you. But you've sure come home to a boy that needs you and will treat you right, pardner. You and me can do a lot of good together, Mac. You won't get poured off into the hands of bartenders and gamblers and honkytonk girls, not by a damn sight. You're going into land and grass and beef, and a good American family... So sleep sound, pardner. We'll help each other along, and maybe really amount to something in this country, Mac..."

He went to sleep under a starry sky, with his arm around the pouch and a gentle breeze sighing through the junipers and cedars of the sheltering ridge.

IN THE MORNING Hewlett made coffee, smoked a cigarette, saddled up and rode on in the direction of Currycomb, with "Mac" snug and secure in his saddlebags. There was a soaring singing sensation in the Kid's chest, and he kept the bay gelding at a steady pace. The world looked fresh and new in the early morning light, as young and clean as Hewlett felt... When he got to the Bitterroot, where it ran deep and cool under that bridge, he'd strip down and plunge into the water, and feel even cleaner and better. Most cowhands didn't go out of their way much to take a bath, but Hewlett liked to swim and the glowing freshness that came afterward.

But this side of the river, three riders broke out of a canyon and bore down on Hewlett, and he had a quick cold premonition of trouble. They looked Mexican, although they wore the range clothes of this country, and he had a hunch they were from the

Chacos clan. "Oh, no, not now," he said aloud, watching them narrowly. "Not at a time like this..." They resembled Chacos, he thought, but all Mexicans looked more or less alike to him. Maybe he was just jumpy on account of that gold dust.

They were, in fact, the remnants of a band of border outlaws, on their way home from an unsuccessful foray to the north, in which the rest of the crew had been wiped out. They were in an ugly vengeful mood, and the sight of a lone gringo brightened their beady eyes and bared their white teeth. One of them was Pablito Chacos, a brother of the deceased in Titusville, and when he saw the golden shine of Kid Hewlett's hair beneath the hat, that was all the identification Pablito needed. He spoke to the others, and they started fanning out as they approached the wagon road.

Kid Hewlett knew for certain then, and he drew and fired and threw the big bay into a headlong run for the bridge, the only shelter he had any chance of reaching. His second shot blew one man out of the saddle, the pony running free, and the other two opened fire and came galloping after the Kid. The first one lay still in the bleached grass.

He flung shots back as he rode, slowing them a trifle but not hitting again, and the Mexicans' lead was snarling close around Hewlett and his horse. *There's no getting away from it*, the Kid thought, with bitterness. *Start using a gun, and you have to keep on fighting. They won't let you stop...* Another dead one, and two more on his neck. The cry of "Chacos" rose behind him, and Hewlett knew his hunch had been accurate. But what a hell of a time to run into this outfit.

Kid Hewlett veered off the trail to swing in under this end of the bridge, and the bay was broadside on the riverbank when the bullet struck solidly. Hewlett felt the horse shudder and lurch, and he kicked clear and landed

loose and rolling as the bay went down in a storm of dust.

Scrambling back to the horse, thrashing in the death throes, Hewlett ripped the saddlebags off and lunged in under the bridgeway, with shots kicking dirt over him and tugging at his brush jacket. In temporary safety beneath the bridge, Hewlett unbuckled the saddlebags, hauled the pouch of gold dust out, and tossed it into the Bitterroot.

Then the Mexicans split up and came in on either flank to catch him in a crossfire. Kid Hewlett got the one to his right, square in the dark scarred face and dead before he hit the ground, but the one on his left—Pablito Chacos—had a bead on the Kid, and drilled him as he came whirling around. Hewlett crumpled clawing against the embankment, and slid twisting down to the water's edge in a loose disjointed sprawl.

Pablito Chacos dismounted and ducked in under the abutment, taking Hewlett's belt and guns, and going through his pockets. He found only seven silver dollars, and jingled them angrily in his hand before putting them away in his own pocket. Then he spat upon Kid Hewlett's body, and booted it over the edge into the stream...

he was lying with the upper part of his body on the bank and his legs in the water. Beneath his chest was a buckskin pouch stenciled with the name, "Mac." The Kid was more dead than alive, but there was a spark left in him; they figured he might pull through and live to spend some of that gold.

The water must have revived the Kid, and maybe helped keep him alive, but they couldn't understand how he'd made it back to shore with that heavy bag of gold dust.

Neither could anyone explain the body of a blonde woman, which was found lodged in the brush and driftwood of the riverbank above the bridge.

If Reno Capen had been there, he could have told them that it was Ursula, following that bag of gold even in death, all this way down the Bitterroot River. But Capen was hospitalized in a doctor's house in Dalmyra, and by way of beginning to get a long much-needed rest.

They took Kid Hewlett to the Currycomb, because it was nearer than town, and had the doctor out there to attend to him. So Capen and Hewlett did not meet in convalescence, and Reno never knew what became of that pouch of dust.

To tell the truth he did not care, as long as it was out of his hands.

HOURS LATER when they found Kid Hewlett in under the bridge,



A Triggerfast Novelet by Roe Richmond

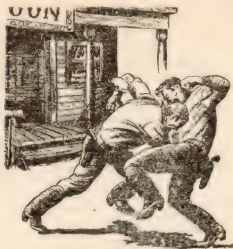
TOMBSTONE TRAP

leads off the January 1955 issue of

DOUBLE ACTION WESTERN

now on sale at all stands

Eddie O'Brien lived up to what you'd expect in the disposition of a redheaded gal, and she didn't feel like making it easy for Buck McKee and Tortilla Joe to help her.



INCIDENT AT ALKALI

Buck McKee and Tortilla Joe Story

by Lee Floren

BUCK MCKEE and Tortilla Joe walked into the *Bull Horn Saloon* and they walked in on a fight. The girl was around twenty. She had red hair; she wore old levis and a blue shirt, and she had lots of strong points. She was mad clear through, her eyes as hot as coals in a forge. "You dirty devil, Bart Matthews," she stormed.

Buck and his Mexican partner stopped right inside the door. Outside the Montana sun was at its bleak highest point. This range sweltered and groaned under the blistering heat. They hadn't wanted a fight; they had just wanted a drink to wash some of the alkali down their throats.

Buck looked at Bart Matthews. He saw a big man, probably in his middl-

thirties. Despite the heat, this Matthews wore a brown suit and a necktie. Under his open coat Buck saw a broad black gunbelt. He saw that Matthews was angry, too.

Clean shaven jowls quivered. "Don't get flip with me, Eddie O'Brien. You get no extension on that loan; you can rant and holler as much as you want to—but no extension, *sabe?*"

"You cheat shylock—when we got that loan a few months back you said you'd renew it if we kept the interest paid up. Well, we've paid all the interest and now you won't back up your word, huh?"

"You got that promise in writing?"

"No."

"I don't remember giving that promise, Miss O'Brien. You got a few hours yet before the paper comes due. Maybe in that time you can raise the money and pay me. I'd hate like hell to foreclose."

"Humph... The day of miracles is past."

Brown shoulders moved nonchalantly. "A person never knows, Miss Eddie. Don't lose faith, and please don't curse me; I'm only a business man." He turned and looked at Buck and Tortilla Joe. "What the hell you two drifters want?"

Buck kept down his anger and the wide face of Tortilla Joe showed a dumb and surprised look.

"Why," Buck said, "I only want some whiskey, nothin' more; this is a saloon, ain't it?"

The big man summoned a smile. "Pardon me if I spoke hard, men; this female has been devilin' me. Thought maybe you two was lookin' for a job."

"Vino for me," Tortilla Joe said. "We do look for the jobs, *senor.*"

"No jobs around here." He reached for a bottle. "I'm Bart Matthews, owner of this saloon, the store, and the Circle Cross outfit—only spread around here."

"Except for our Bar S," the red-head put in, testily.

Buck looked at the girl. "You hirin', Miss?"

"What would I use for wages? You heard us talking. My father is flat on his back—you sound like a damned fool, you long drink of alkali water!"

"Thanks," Buck said.

Tortilla Joe said, "*Gracias, senorita.*"

She said, "To hell with all of you," and stalked outside. Six eyes followed her out; then, the batwings swished. They heard her boots on the plank walk and this sound then receded and became nothing.

Buck said, "She was mad."

"She still ees mad," Tortilla Joe said.

"She's a lovely young woman, too," Buck said. "She shouldn't get that mad; it don't become her."

Tortilla Joe turned his brown, dog-gish eyes on Bart Matthews. "What she mad about, Meester Matthews?"

"You heard the conversation," the big man said sharply. "That's our business, and none of yours; you boys heeled with jack?"

"Four dollars and eighty two cents between us," Buck said.

The big hand made a sweep, cigar glowing. "Then Alkali City is no place for you. We only cater to the gents with dough, who want to spend it; take an old man's advice, and drift on, savvy?"

"Not even stay over night?" Buck asked.

"Not on less than five bucks," Bart Matthews said. "I own the only hotel, and my rates are five bucks a night, for a double. By your own admission, you couldn't even afford a room."

"How much ees the room weethout the bed-bugs?" Tortilla Joe was very naive, very innocent.

"How funny," Bart Matthews scoffed.

Buck spoke to his partner. "Watch your tongue, or we'll get in trouble with this big social leader—and we don't want that."

Bart Matthews studied them. Buck paid him a dollar and he put it in his pocket, not offering any change. He walked to the back of the bar and went into a room. Before the door closed, the partners saw the inside of that room: a bed, complete with pink bedspread. Some chairs, a desk, and a safe against the far wall. Then the door went shut.

Buck said, "You notice that safe?"

Tortilla Joe nodded. "Weeth the can opener, I could open it."

Buck said, "Perish such an evil thought." The redhead was climbing on her horse across the street. She rode a sorrel and her hair matched the redness of the gelding. They made a beautiful picture.

"Ol' George O'Brien's girl, no, Buck-shots?"

"Didn't know the old devil had a girl."

"He mention her once, years ago. She was back in the east, going to the school—*la escuela* there—he told us."

"Wonder what is wrong with old George, 'cause she said he'd never walk again. You know, Tortilla, I think that girl is getting into trouble."

Tortilla Joe said, "I know she ees, for sure." The Mexican stared out the window. "That other womans there—she ees going to beat up on the redhead!"

"Holy smoke!"

THIS OTHER woman was about the redhead's age, and she was as blonde as the redhead was red. Eddie O'Brien had dropped her boot out of the stirrup and now she stood with her legs wide, fists raised.

"You want trouble, eh, Blondie?"

Blondie said, "Stay away from my man," and added a personal remark.

Buck could clearly hear Eddie O'Brien's reply. "You're drunk; I want no bit of Bart Matthews, the lousy shylock. You can have him—dirty socks and all." What she ended with

was doubtless what some men called the blonde.

Buck said, "Oh oh," and he went outside. They were tangling like professionals. He thought, *Been a long time since I've seen a couple of heifers tangle horns. Last time was in that saloon down in Las Cruces...*

Tortilla Joe said, "They are the even match, no?"

Alkali City had come out of its lethargy. Dogs barked, people shouted, and soon everybody in town was on the street watching the fight. Tortilla Joe had made no idle statement—they were evenly matched. Eddie O'Brien could handle her dukes. She was young, tough from the saddle, and hard from riding and roping. The other woman, whom Buck immediately classified as a dancehall girl, knew tricks in fighting, and what she lacked in muscular strength she made up in fistic ability.

She hit Eddie with a solid and clean right; Eddie went down, rolled in the dust, hesitated a moment, and then came up, fists working. Buck watched with devilish glee. Old George O'Brien's daughter was a chip off the old block. Eddie feinted, doing a rather good job at it, and then led with a left, crossing the right. The blonde went backward and hit a store, which kept her from falling down.

Eddie closed in, fists up, and then Buck caught the reflection of the sun on cold steel, saw the flash of the knife. He saw the slanted, ugly eyes, the peeled-back lips, the rise of the knife. The knife came down and Eddie O'Brien jumped back, the blade slitting her sleeve.

By this time, Buck had moved in. He came in from the side, grabbing the upraised knife, and he twisted hard. The blonde screamed, tried to kick him, and dropped the knife. Buck heard it hit the board sidewalk and, from the corner of his eye, saw Tortilla Joe bend and pick it up. Then he

released the blonde, spinning her back against the wall.

She panted like a winded tigress, cursing him. Eddie O'Brien said, "Thanks, stranger," and Buck asked, "Did she slit you?"

"Not the flesh; just my sleeve."

Buck kept his eyes on the blonde who eyed him with hate. "That wasn't nice," Buck said. "You could have killed her, blondie."

"I'll kill you for this, you long drink of—"

She started forward, and Buck caught both her upraised arms, pushing her back against the building. He did not want to manhandle her; he had no heart for this chore, but somebody had had to break in and get the knife.

"Take it easy—"

Buck McKee never got to finish the sentence. For a big hand clamped down on his shoulder, turning him.

He looked into the wide face of Bart Matthews. "Get your filthy hands off my woman," the saloonman ordered.

BUCK LOOKED at the arrogant, big man, and the shuffle of violence was thin against the heat, waiting for the break of action. There came to Buck at this time a number of points: Eddie O'Brien tangling with Matthews, the snobbery and arrogance of the man—and these rubbed against the usual good nature of Buckshot McKee. They stood like this for a long, long moment, and the violence simmered and crackled across the heat of this Montana day.

Buck asked, "So she is your woman, eh?"

"My woman; and you keep your dirty hands off her."

Buck said, "She used a knife. Cold steel. Terrible thing, that steel. I used it at San Juan."

"She had a right; this woman threatened her."

There came another thought to

Buckshot McKee at this time: this blonde had jumped onto Eddie with the intent of killing her; something told him that. But why had she wanted to kill Eddie O'Brien?

Buck said, quietly, "Drop your hand from my shoulder, Matthews."

"Drifter, move out of my town."

Buck made his move then, and the aura of violence broke and became real; his right fist came up and he hit with all his power. Boots shuffled and sounded, and fists hit flesh. The blow landed against Matthews' forehead and skidded off, and the man came in. Buck moved back and their boots sounded and Buck took some hard ones. They moved into the street; blood came down to make red dots on the yellow dust, and Buck fought as he had never fought before. Then it was over with Matthews sitting in the dust, with Buckshot McKee leaning forward and gasping for air, the hammering of this man still pounding his belly.

Matthews leaned forward, spat some blood, and then looked up, his hand on his gun. But before he could speak, the voice of Tortilla Joe smashed across the dust, bringing attention.

"No gons they shoot, *senor*. I have my own .45 on you, Matthews. Look aroun', *senor*, and see the beegness of the barrel."

Matthews looked up, and his face was the same. He said, "All right," and got to his boots, legs wide. He kept watching the Mexican's big gun, and then he said to Buckshot McKee, "I jumped over my traces too fast, drifter."

Buck spat blood. He wondered if one or three teeth were loose on the right side of his jaw. He said, "We wanted no trouble. You tried to rub salt into us at the bar. A knife is not a good thing for a woman to have."

The blonde said, "Come on, Bart."

He shook her hand from his sleeve.

She moved back and stood rigid, and Buck got the impression she was glad to be out of this, to stand to one side.

Bart Matthews spoke to the townspeople. "Scatter back to where you belong, you damned bunch of gossipin' sagehens." They went away, for he was the boss here; he had been dumped in the dust by a stranger—still, his word was law in this town. Buck could see the sum and total of his power.

This left five of them: the blonde, leaning against the store inspecting the torn front of her shirt; Eddie O'Brien, panting and scratched around the face; Tortilla Joe, who had juggled his gun back to holster; Bart Matthews, who had reason and not anger in his eyes now; Buckshot McKee, who still wondered about his teeth.

Matthews said, "You're tough, stranger. I could use you and your partner here."

"No guns," Buck said.

"Never hire out our gons," Tortilla Joe said.

A scowl crossed the huge face. Bart Matthews would have a beautiful shiner inside an hour or so. "Then why did you jump in, fella? Did you know this girl here—Eddie—from some other locality?"

Buck said, "Never saw her before in my life." He added, "Except when she was in your saloon, of course."

"Then why?"

"The knife," Buck said; "the knife."

THERE WAS the dust, the ageless, gray Montana dust. Three horses, singlefooting, hoofs digging dust, scattering dust.

Buck said, "They'll dig their roots in and get steady again."

Eddie O'Brien looked at him and frowned. "What in the name of heaven are you talking about, Bill Olson?"

Buck smiled at the name of Bill Olson. That was his name, now; Tortilla Joe had told the girl, face very

somber, that he was Tequila Smith. There was a lot here the two did not understand, so they used these names—they had used them before, too.

"My teeth," Buck said; "he loosened them."

"Oh."

Tortilla Joe said, "Your face she ees looked like the tiger she ees sleep weeth you, Eddie."

"She had long fingernails."

They jogged along. The heat was dying somewhat, for the sun was moving downward; still, the earth was parched, and the earth would hold heat for some time, even after the western mountains had dissolved the sun.

Buck said, "Tell us, Eddie."

"Nothing much."

Tortilla Joe said, "We would like to know; we are like the old womans—we like the gossips, no?"

"Yes," Buck said.

She had a cut upper lip; still, she could talk—she was, after all, a woman. The deal was simple. Drouth had moved in on this range, drying up the creeks and water-holes, sinking the springs into arid nothingness.

"We own the only big water-hole left. Sunken Springs. Over across the hills, it is—we got it homesteaded, too. Bart Matthews has been here for about ten years, they tell me—Dad and I have been here three, but there's never been a drouth before. We homestead Sunken Springs. But this hit us hard—we lost to winter kill last year—so we had to borrow money."

Tortilla Joe said, "From the Bart Matthews you borrow it, no?"

"Yes."

"And now, when the note she ees due, you cannot pay eet back?"

"That's the deal, Tequila Smith."

Tortilla Joe sighed. "The roots of all evils, she ees *dineros*. When theese note she comes due?"

"Tomorrow."

Tortilla Joe looked at his partner, but his words were directed toward

Eddie O'Brien. Tortilla Joe sighed with deep and tender regard. "Eef you would tell me, how much she ees the note?"

"None of your business," the girl said. "You two helped me in town, but that doesn't give you the right to pry into my financial affairs. I've invited you to the ranch for supper and a bunk, nothing more."

Tortilla Joe sighed again, head down. "Womens they are the riddles," he said.

"Always," Buck said.

Tortilla Joe asked, "Tell us about the blonde?"

That was simple. The blonde was Isabel Andrews. She worked in Bart Matthews' saloon. "Runs card tables, and those chores. Bart and her are old buddies; they know where they stand with each other."

"Why did she tie into you?" Buck asked.

The girl frowned and rubbed her cracked lip gingerly. "She had a reason—two reasons, I guess. One, to lay me up, so I couldn't ride to Sacaton tomorrow, and hit up the bank there for the money. The other, well—Bart has made a few passes at me, he has."

Buck grinned. "He have any luck, honey?"

"Don't let your dirty mind make up scenes, cowboy."

Buck winked at Tortilla Joe. "We're getting along fine," he said.

"Bucno, Beel."

BUCK FOUND himself not liking this redhead too much. She was brazen to a degree, and she was feminine to a degree, and then he dismissed this from his mind—her father, possibly unbeknown to her, was an old friend of his and Tortilla Joe. They had come to visit with old George, it seemed, at the right time.

Buck wondered how much the loan was. He and Tortilla Joe had punched cows all winter and spring down in

New Mexico and between them they had about four hundred bucks. Old George could have that if he needed it; old George could have their boots, if he wanted them.

Buck remembered Durango. Two waddies in the clink for stealing horses, and old George O'Brien happening in town. He remembered the sing of the hacksaw blade against bars.

Good old George.

"What happened to your ol' man?"

Buck asked Eddie.

"Horse fell on him; hurt his spine. He's in bed. Doc says he'll walk again. I just said he wouldn't walk to make it look worse than it was; wanted to get an extension on that loan."

Buck sighed. "Females, always deceitful..." Apparently he was talking to himself. "How about Sacaton? Can you get a loan there?"

"They'll loan me a hundred, but not three fifty."

Buck said, "So that is the size of the loan, eh?"

"Oh, shut up."

"Thanks," Tortilla Joe said.

"How much you got in the cookie jar?" Buck asked.

She looked at him. "Not the cookie jar, monkey—down in the flour bin, and I have the whole sum of twenty seven bucks there."

"Too bad," Buck said.

Tortilla Joe shook his head slowly.

Buck pulled his bronc to a halt. "I've heard enough," he said solemnly. "My little heart bleeds for you, redhead; you're hard up. We're jes' two drifters, two humans without wife or child or kin, and we don't want to break your spread by eating a meal at it, because we both eat like horses—and spuds and eggs cost money, not to mention bread."

"Feeding you two won't break me," the girl said. "Come along, men."

Buck shook his head.

She looked at Tortilla Joe. His face was so long it rested on his saddle

horn; his doggyish eyes rolled in damp sockets, oozing canine sympathy.

"We rides the other way, womans."

Buck pulled his horse close to hers. His arm went around her waist, he pulled her in, and he kissed her loud and damply. "Your cracked lips makes your smoochin' sticky," he said.

She swung but she missed; he had used his spurs. He and Tortilla Joe loped toward the western hills. She sat there for a while and watched them and then she rode on.

Hidden in the hills, they followed her. They kept brush between them and her. Tortilla Joe rubbed his cheek.

"Seems odd how we comes eento the country aimin' to veesit our ol' *amigo*, George O'Brien, an' we fin' heem een troubles—weeth only one day to go, too. Good luck we do not tell her our real names."

"Ol' George is an odd cuss. He'd never take no help from nobody, Tortilla. Even as much as we owe him, he'd never take a cent from us. Damn it, he'd loose his spread first, he's thet proud."

"He save our necks."

Buck said, "That must be the spread; she's ridin' into the yard. She's got a nice build on her. We're a quarter mile away, and I can still see her curves. I sure can."

"You have the good imaginations," Tortilla Joe said.

THERE WAS a moon that night. Tortilla Joe hunkered in the underbrush back of the Bar S ranch house and petted the pup. The pup liked him; he ran a wet and long tongue across the Mexican's jowls. "You cut your tongue on my wheelers, puppy."

The pup sat down, leaning against Tortilla Joe. Time went on and a horse whinnied from out on the pasture. Tortilla Joe stirred and the dog licked his hand this time. "You got the soft tongue, *perro*."

They waited about ten more minutes.

Buck McKee came out of the darkness and squatted beside his partner. He rubbed his hands together. "Flour on my hands," he whispered.

"She told the truth?"

"The poke was there," Buck said. "In the flour."

Tortilla Joe patted the dog and got to his feet with ponderous slowness. "Now we make the bunks back on the reemrock, no?"

"Then we ride to Alkali City in the morning," Buck said.

They went through the brush. The pup followed them to their horses, which were about a quarter mile from the O'Brien spread. They mounted and rode away but the pup did not follow. He sat there and watched them until they were out of sight; then he returned to the ranch house and barked at the moon.

BUCK MCKEE had a boot on the rail. He said, "Hell, honey, I'm sorry I horned into that fight. Any woman has the right to kill another woman that aims to steal her man."

"You're cute," the blonde said.

Tortilla Joe rubbed his hand up and down her back. She said, "Don't do that, somebody might see. They might report back to Bart."

"We are alone—the three of us—een the saloon," the Mexican said. "Bart, he ees ride out of town, a hour ago."

"He went out to the O'Brien spread," the blonde said. "He's got it timed to the hour, he has. At five, the note is due. Say, where did you boys spend the night?"

Buck said, "Sleepin' out on the rimrock."

"Ground hard?"

"Almighty hard." Buck acted like his back ached. He leaned against her; his arm went around her slim waist, too."

"That's nice," she said. "But if

Bart came in—or somebody reported back to him—or somebody saw us—”

Buck said, “That’s right.” He took back his arm. “Tequila Smith, unhand the lady. Who wants another drink?”

“I do.”

“Me, too, Buckshots.” He added hurriedly, “I mean Beel Smeeth.”

The blonde giggled a little. “Never knew I could hate a woman so much as to try to knife her. Bart is a slick one: he was mad for me and now he’s coolin’ off, and he wants that red-head—one reason he lent her *dincro*. She can’t pay him. Wonder what he’ll do?”

Buck said, “Let’s talk about us, not money.”

“Terrible theeng, moneys.”

She cuddled up to Buck. She cuddled next to Tortilla. The whiskey gave her a breath that would melt the varnish off the old piano. “I like you boys. If you stay in town tonight, I got an extra bunk down at my place. No, Bart might hear about it—”

“Another drink, Blondie?” Buck asked.

They spent the afternoon in the cool saloon drinking with Bart Matthews’ girl friend. About sundown, in rode Bart, and he stalked in, carrying a buckskin sack, with a sprinkling of flour on it. He glared at them. “What the hell you two doin’ here?”

Buck essayed surprise. “Jes’ drinkin’, Bart. Why ask?”

Bart Matthews looked at Blondie. “Sister, you’re soused. Get into my office, savvy? Drunk and disorderly again. Drinkin’ with a gent that knocked me down, too; don’t you think I have any pride?”

“They’re good men, Bart.”

“Good for what?” Cynically.

“All afternoon they’ve bought drinks. The three of us have been here and they’ve paid money into the till.”

“Thought you didn’t have any dough?” Bart Matthews studied Buck.

Buck said, “I found five bucks in my boot top. Forget I done sewed it in there. But a man should never come between another man and his woman; we ain’t doin’ that, Bart. I’m plumb sorry I had to hit you.”

“I’ll get you.”

“When?”

“Later.”

Buck said, “You sound mean, Bart; you sound disappointed. Why should you be? By your own words you admit you got a nice ranch for little or nothing—”

“Close your big trap, cowboy.”

Tortilla Joe turned his glass of wine and let the dying sunlight reflect from its redness.

“A rude, rude mans, Beel Smeeth.”

Bart Matthews said, “Get to hell out of this town inside of an hour, or I’ll send men out to bury you two.” He jerked Blondie by the arm. “Come along, woman—you’re stiff.”

“I am not drunk.”

He got Blondie by the arm and propelled her ahead of him toward his office door. Once she almost fell, her knees giving away—he caught her and steadied her, and his face was savage.

“Open the door, Blondie.”

She opened the door and he pushed her inside and she collapsed on the bed, her dress halfway up her thighs. He walked over, pulled down her dress, and then he went to the safe.

He knelt in front of the safe.

Buck and Tortilla Joe watched, but to an onlooker it would appear they were merely eyeing their drinks, not looking through the open door.

“The sack he carries, she ees full,” Tortilla Joe said.

Buck said, “Take another good look at the safe.”

At this moment, Bart Matthews got off his knees, and went to the door. He slammed it so hard the hinges jumped.

Buck said, “He’s the mad man.”

“We wait until he comes out, no?”

"Yes."

WITHIN ten minutes, the man came out of his office. The opening of the door showed them Blondie still slept in drunken sleep on the cot. The door closed and Mart Matthews said, "Now where the hell did that woman get the money?"

"You mean, *Blondie*?" Buck asked.

"What money Blondie has, I give to her; I'm gettin' so damned old I talk to myself. Get out of town, you two."

Buck said, "Okay, okay, okay. We want no trouble. We got on the wrong side of you once—that redhead ran us off even before we got a meal for helpin' her. We'll leave your danged town for good."

"Good riddance."

Bart Matthews stood by the window and watched them leave town. Tortilla Joe nodded and Buck insultingly lifted his finger to his nose. Then he put his tied reins around his saddlehorn and wagged both hands. "Goodby,

you no good shylock."

They rode at a walk toward the rimrock. Below them in the basin the shadows gathered and night would soon enfold this land.

Buck said, "The redhead will tell her papa about us, and ol' George will know who we are—by the description his daughter hands out. Wish we could have seen the old devil."

"Better not we see heem; he weel be mad for us helpin' heem."

They drew rein in the rimrock and sat their broncs there. Buck said, "We wait for midnight or around there, huh?"

"Be the moon. The range weel be clear."

Buck looked down at Alkali City. "You got another good look at that safe," he said. "What do you think of it?"

"Weeth the can-opener, I can open eet."

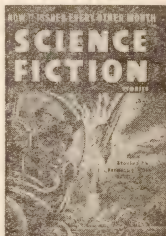
Buck sighed. "Come midnight, we ride back to Alkali City," he said.

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SCIENCE FICTION STORIES



Jack Archer had paid part of his debt to society; he'd served his time and had gone straight ever since — except for one little thing. And that unpaid section was about to undo the new life he'd built up . . .

BLOOD MONEY

by Ray G. Ellis

JACK ARCHER stood back from the window, far enough back to be in the shadows, and watched the two travel-worn riders jog up the main street of Buff City. They would be looking for him within the hour, he knew. First, though they would stop at the *Silver Dollar* for whiskey to wash down the dust of the trail.

He watched with dread, and yet a kind of relief as the two men dismounted in front of the saloon. There was no mistaking Red Lippa as he knotted the reins of the claybank at the rail; his face was burnt to the shade of his vivid red hair, and Archer remembered how the man blistered and peeled in the sun—never turning brown and getting meaner the redder he got. He was as burnt now as Archer had ever seen him.

The other man, Guy Cresson, was shorter than Lippa and as brown as

Lippa was red. A scar ran from just below his eye to his chin, pulling the man's mouth down in a perpetual scowl. Archer couldn't see this from the window, but he remembered it. He watched as the two men surveyed the street for a moment, then shoved through the batwings out of sight.

He watched until the doors hung still again, then walked back to his desk. *I should be doing something*, he thought. *You don't just stand idly shuffling paper, when...* He shrugged. What was there to do? He walked to the back of the large room and began to run off the weekly edition of the *Buff City News* on the hand-operated press.

It was a mechanical thing, running the press, and usually Archer enjoyed the rhythm of it, but now there was no rhythm within him. When he nearly

caught his hand in the press as it slammed close, he quit. It didn't seem to matter much now, whether the paper came out or not.

He sat down at his desk to wait. Thoughts, remembrances, whirled in his head and he thought over the seven years in prison; fourteen years to young manhood before prison. He saw his mistakes, the one he had paid for with seven years of his life, and the other one, the one he had not paid for—yet.

It was almost exactly an hour later when the door to the *Buff City News* office opened. Archer swung around in his chair, knowing who it was, resigned now.

Lippa entered first and Archer saw that he was bigger now than before, but that was the only change that was apparent in the man. Cresson followed Lippa inside and closed the door behind him. The two men studied Archer for a minute, then a tight smile creased the corners of Lippa's mouth. "Jack Volney. You didn't think you could hide by just changing your name, did you?"

Archer sighed. "No, I guess I knew you would show up some day."

Lippa walked toward the back of the room, looking over the newspaper office carefully. "A real newspaper man, huh? I knew you got interested in this when we was in prison. Never figured you'd have enough money to do anything about it. Must have taken some little cash to set up this layout."

Archer stiffened at the implication. He rose from his chair slowly, watching Cresson out of the corner of his eye. "An old man owned it; sold out cheap" he said easily. "Can't say I've done much better than he did, though."

Lippa walked to the desk and planted himself in front of Archer. "It still took money," he said. "I figger this is just about your share. Where's the rest of it?"

"Honest money bought this paper, Lippa," Archer said. "Something you wouldn't know anything about. Anne

and I worked—" He stopped as he saw Lippa's eyes change at the mention of Anne. He had talked too much and now he had dragged her into it.

"You married Anne," Lippa said softly. The grey eyes went blank and Archer knew that, for the moment, Lippa was fourteen years younger and in Auroria, Colorado—gazing at Anne Faraday, Songbird of the Rockies.

She never loved you, Archer thought. *She had already forgotten you when we were sent up. I wrote to her secretly for those long seven years and she waited. You had a dream, Lippa, but that's all it was—a dream. She's not the same now,* Archer thought, and he felt a stab of remorse. It was his fault that she wasn't the same and now the time of reckoning had come.

"Come on, Red," Cresson said. "Let's get the money and get out of here."

Lippa's thoughts jolted back to the present and his eyes became hard glass again. "All right, Volney," he said. "Where is it? Where's the goddam money?"

"At home," he said. "I'll have to go get it."

"We'll go get it," Lippa corrected.

"No," Archer said, "I won't run out; it's too late for that. You wait here."

"So you can get a gun and maybe the marshal?"

Archer shrugged and walked to the front door.

"Not that way," Lippa said. "That marshal was snoopin' around a while ago. You've got a back door."

ARCHER walked to the back of the room, followed by the two men. The alley was empty and Archer turned to his left. Lord, what a fool he'd been, keeping the money all these years. Ann had begged him to leave it where they'd hidden it just before they were captured, but seven years in prison puts strange thoughts into a man's head. He'd taken it from their hiding place and carried it with him, never

spending a cent but always thinking of it as insurance against something that he couldn't define.

They'd worked hard those first years, he remembered, and saved until they had enough money to buy the paper. But always the other money stood between them and the full happiness that they might have had. After a while, he'd decided to return the money to the bank; but somehow the right time never came, and now it would never go back where it belonged. Archer realized sadly that merely getting rid of the money would do no good.

"What's she like now, Volney?" Lippa said.

"Anne?"

"Sure, Anne; who else?"

Archer shrugged. "A little older, but just as pretty."

"She always did cotton to me," Lippa said. "If you hadn't got time off for good behavior, she'd be mine now."

Archer said nothing, but he felt a stirring of anger mingled with fear—not for himself, but for Anne. She was prettier than when she had been in Colorado, and the young figure was still with her at thirty-two. To a man who had been behind bars for fourteen years she would appear as a dream...

They came up to the house, small and brilliantly white in the sun. The lawn was a deep green and Archer noticed with a start that the house was really rather attractive. A condemned man sees things he never saw before, he thought, then shoved the thought from him.

"You're a real law-abiding gent now, aren't you?" Lippa said. "How about that, Guy? He's got himself a house and everything."

Cresson nodded and said nothing.

Archer took them inside and remembered with vast relief that Anne would be at her church circle. He hurried through the house and out the back door. "Money's in the woodshed."

"Hey, where's the wife?" Lippa said. "Don't tell me I came all this way and

don't get to see little Anne again."

Anger became stronger in Archer. "You came for the money and that's all you'll get," he said shortly.

He pulled open the door to the small shed and began to throw wood from the pile near the door. Suddenly he stopped and turned to look at the two men. "You'll leave when you get the money."

"Sure," Lippa said. "We don't want to hang around here, do we Guy?"

"Let's quit talkin' and get the money," Cresson said.

Archer began to throw more wood from the pile. Cresson, he knew, was ready to leave; but he wasn't sure of Lippa. At the bottom of the pile of wood was a metal box. He lifted it and shoved it at Lippa.

"Here it is," Archer said. "All ten thousand of it."

Lippa grabbed the box and opened it. He stared at the money for a moment, hardly believing what he saw. Then he squatted and began to count the banknotes, throwing them on the ground as he did so. Cresson leaned over his shoulder, intent on the cash, also.

Archer watched the two for several minutes, feeling anger build up inside him. He thought of what the money had done to him and to Anne, and now what it would always do to them even though it was gone. The anger became a strong thing; he grabbed a board from the pile of wood and swung it at Lippa. It glanced off the man's shoulder and grazed his ear as Lippa fell to one side.

Cresson straightened up and Archer remembered the man's speed with a gun as he looked into the barrel of Cresson's forty-five. Lippa shook his head and came to his feet. "Hold it, Guy," he said.

"So, you don't want the dough," Lippa said, turning to Archer. "That was killin' you, wasn't it, watchin' me count it out. I was goin' divvy with you, Volney, but now you won't get a goddam cent."

Lippa shoved the banknotes back into the box and tucked it under his arm. "Come on, Guy," he said; "let's go."

"You goin' to leave him here?" Cresson asked.

"Sure; he's a law-abidin' man now—he won't do nothin'." Lippa threw back his head and laughed.

ARCHER watched them as they left the yard. Suddenly he had to sit down as he realized how close he had just come to death. He rolled a smoke and drew deeply on it. *The money's gone now*, he thought. It would have been better to have destroyed it than let it fall into Lippa's hands. He threw the smoke from him, disgusted at the way things had gone and disgusted with himself. He walked back to the newspaper office.

He ran off a small stack of papers then the front door opened and Marshal Overton came in. Archer left the press open and walked uneasily to the front of the room.

"Hello, Jack," Overton said. "How's things going?"

Archer looked at the man suspiciously. Overton usually didn't waste words on a greeting. "Sit down, Marshal," Archer said.

Overton shoved a chair to the desk with his foot and eased his bulk into it. "Those two friends of yours?" he said.

"Knew them a long time ago," Archer said.

"Noticed they came in here. Then you took them out the back way and went toward your house."

"Thought I'd show them the place," Archer said.

Overton pulled out a cigar and lit it. "Don't look like the type that'd be interested in that sort of thing," he said out of the corner of his mouth. He rose and looked around the room. "Got a nice place, Archer," he said. "You've done the community a lot of good. Hope you keep it up."

Archer sat at the desk and said noth-

ing. Overton stood silently for a minute, then moved toward the door. "Just wondered who they were," he said. "They're gettin' kinda noisy over in the *Silver Dollar*. Spendin' plenty from what I hear."

Archer moved nervously in his chair after Overton left. Overton had hinted and Archer wondered just how much the man knew. If he knew that Archer was really Jack Volney, the marshal had never let on through the past years. Suddenly he knew that Overton knew who Archer was; when the marshal had seen Lippa and Cresson come into the office and then go out again, he added it up. And now Archer understood the reason for Overton's visit. He was giving him a chance to make things right and Archer knew that it was too late. Overton knew that Archer had the missing money now and he, Archer, had turned it over to Lippa; he felt small and helpless then for what he had done.

ANNE CAME in then on her way home from the church circle. Archer looked at her as she came toward him. She wore a simple blue, full-skirted dress. Her black hair was pulled back from her face and hung long in the back. For a moment Archer compared her with girl he had known so long ago in Colorado. She was more beautiful now, he decided, except that the sparkle was gone from her eyes. And now she was to be dragged into this.

"Is the paper out already?" she said. She came closer and looked at him. "What's the matter, Jack? Something's happened."

"Lippa and Cresson are back," he said. He watched the fear come into her eyes and he hated himself for it.

"Did... Did you give them the money?"

Archer nodded. "I had no choice."

"I knew it would happen," she murmured; "I knew it."

Archer rose and went to her. "The

money's gone now," he said. "We can forget it." But he knew as he said the words that it was a lie.

She stepped away from him and looked into his eyes. Archer saw pity there and realized that it was for him. Anger stirred in him as he saw that she thought him a weakling; he searched for words and found none. She pushed from him and left the office and Archer knew that in that moment they had drawn a little farther apart.

He sank back into the chair. *What else could I have done?* he thought, *with the two of them beside me, ready to gun me down.* Suddenly he realized that it wasn't for what he had done this day that she thought him weak, but for the years that he had held onto the money; the thought was like the bite of a whip.

He sat in the office until the shadows lengthened on the streets of Buff City. As he closed the newspaper office he looked across the street and saw that the two mounts of Lipa and Cresson were gone. *It's done now*, he thought.

The evening was cool as Archer walked toward his home and he shivered, more from a coldness inside than from the night air. This had to come; he'd known that from the beginning, and he wondered why he had shoved it from his mind over the years. He knew now that he would have never spent the money, no matter how much they had needed it.

Suddenly a thought struck him and he began to run toward his home. Lipa had wanted to see Anne, and the man wasn't one to be easily swayed from his course. Lord, why hadn't he thought of that sooner. Lipa, woman-starved for fourteen years in prison, and dreaming a dream of Anne...

Archer ran up to the front door of the house, noticing with some relief that the two horses were not there. He shoved open the front door, heedless of the danger that might lie within. But

the house was dark and quiet. "Anne," he called.

No answer.

He went to the kitchen, found a chair overturned and his apprehension deepened. He ran to the bedroom and saw Anne lying on the bed.

"Anne. What's happened?"

She turned over and regarded him through tear-stained eyes. "They were here," she said.

Archer felt a blind hate begin to creep through him. "What happened?" he ground out.

She shook her head. "Nothing. I... I got to your old guns in the closet before..." She broke down then and sobbed. Archer fought back the anger within him and sat down beside her, pulling her head to his shoulder.

The old gun was on the bed and he picked it up. He'd sworn years before that he would never wear a gun again and he had kept to that promise. He twirled the cylinder of the gun. "This is empty," he said. "Are you sure nothing happened?"

"I... I told you."

He saw the bruise marks on her arms then. He touched them gently. "You're lying, Anne," he said.

"He was crazy drunk," she said. "Cresson got scared and pulled him away before..." She began to sob again, and Archer stood up.

"You were trying to save me, weren't you?" he said. "You thought I'd be afraid to do anything, so you tried to make me think nothing happened."

She nodded.

ARCHER went to the closet, pulled down the gunbelt and buckled it on. He began to shove shells into the cylinder of the gun. When he had filled five chambers, he dropped the hammer on the empty one.

She watched him silently until he shoved the gun into the holster, then rose from the bed and came to him. "Jack, don't," she said. "There's two

of them; they'll kill you. Let them go, they won't be back."

"I let them take the money," he said. "But not my wife, too; what kind of a man do you think I am?"

"It doesn't matter, any more," she said. "The money's gone now and things will be different. We can forget it, like you said."

But what he had said before was a lie, and now this. He pulled her arms from him. "Taking the money was one thing, Anne, but what they did here is another; I could never face you again if I let that pass."

He left the room, conscious of Anne's eyes on his back. He felt a sudden desire to hold her close just once more, but he fought it and went out of the house.

The light was gone from the sky as he walked toward the center of town. He wondered if Lippa and Cresson would still be in town, and decided they would be; Lippa's arrogance wouldn't let him run. Archer couldn't remember Lippa having ever run from anything.

He reached the main street of the town and saw the two mounts in front of the *Silver Dollar*. A cold hate began somewhere inside of him, a hate that he hadn't felt since he had gone to prison. Only this time it was directed toward just two men instead of the whole world.

As he neared the saloon, he began to wonder who he would go after first. Cresson was the fastest with a gun, but he knew that when the showdown came he would be facing Lippa. He thought of Anne then for a moment, and a little of the anger within him turned on himself. She had suffered all the years because of his weakness and now she would suffer again for what he was about to do. He had no doubt that he wouldn't come out alive, but if he got Lippa he would die with a measure of satisfaction.

Then he was at the batwings of the saloon and he shoved the thoughts from

his head. The bright lights sprayed out from above and below the doors. The sound followed like a hollow echo. He hesitated a moment and took a deep breath. He felt as if he were about to plunge into a cold stream; he forced himself to move. Archer shoved through the doors and stopped just inside.

FOR A MOMENT the noise continued, then began to abate as eyes were turned toward him. The quietness was more due to amazement than anything for this was the town's quiet, peace-loving editor they saw. But now he had guns about his waist and there was something in his eyes that they had never seen before.

By some strange force they sensed that his attention was directed to the two strangers at the bar and slowly a path opened between Archer and Lippa and Cresson.

The two outlaws were the last to notice the change in the saloon, but finally Lippa turned with one elbow still on the bar, curiosity on his face. He straightened and nudged Cresson as his eyes came to rest on Archer.

Lippa stared in astonishment for a moment as if he was seeing a ghost, and he was—a ghost from his past. For just a moment the outlaw looked at Jack Volney, eighteen, wild, and afraid of no gun.

Cresson moved from Lippa and Archer knew that it wasn't from fear. It would take some time for a man to swing his gun from one to the other, and Cresson was playing the odds from habit; Archer never took his eyes from Lippa.

Then it was like a bad dream as he saw Lippa's hand snake for his gun. His own hand seemed to barely move and he fought an impulse to hurry. But the gun came up and he felt it jump in his hand. Lippa suddenly bent over in the middle and his gun fired into the floor as he fell.

Archer felt Cresson's slug slam into

his right shoulder, knocking him half-way around and he dropped the gun as his hand went numb. He saw Cresson raise the gun again and he braced himself for the pound of the slug. He heard a roar of a gun and wondered why he saw no flame from the outlaw's gun. Just before blackness overtook him he saw Cresson twist and fall back against the bar.

Archer came to on one of the tables in the *Silver Dollar*. He saw the doctor, then turned his head to look at the white bandage on his shoulder. "You'll be all right," the doctor said. "Made a good-sized hole, but nothin' got broke."

Archer saw Marshal Overton then and he smiled wanly. "Looks like I'm not so fast any more."

"No, but you're just as crazy."

Archer saw the puzzled stares from the crowd and knew that Overton had told them nothing as to his real identity.

"Good thing the marshal came in when he did, Archer," someone said; "that second feller woulda got you for sure if Overton hadn't followed right in behind you."

Overton bent over the table. "I was kinda expectin' you, Archer," he said. "It was just a guess, but I thought you might have some business with them."

"What kind of business?" Archer said.

Disappointment showed in Overton. He shrugged. "Nothin', I guess," he said; "I've been doin' too much rememberin'."

The crowd parted and Archer

turned his head to see Anne coming toward him. His eyes dropped from her face and he saw that she carried the metal money box under her arm. *She took it from Lippa's mount*, he thought.

She came close to him. "The doctor says you're going to be all right," she said.

"What about that?" he said, nodding toward the box.

Anne looked up at the marshal. "It's nothing," she said; "just something I happened to have with me."

Archer smiled. She was still leaving it up to him but this time there was no doubt about the answer. "Let's give that something to the marshal; I think he'll know what to do with it."

He saw relief flood through her as she handed the box to Overton.

"I know just what to do with it, Mr. Archer," Overton said, accenting the name.

Archer pushed himself to a sitting position. He looked at the puzzled faces about him, puzzled at the conversation that appeared to make sense and yet it didn't. "The *Buff City News* will have a new owner and editor starting tomorrow," he said. "Fellow named Jack Volney; you'll read all about it when the paper comes out in a couple of days."

Anne's eyes sparkled, and Volney knew that more than just their name would be different from now on. "If we're going to get that paper out, we'd better get started," she said.

"I guess that's right," Volney agreed.



A Powerful Novelet by Gordon D. Shirreffs

"SILENT RECKONING"

leads off the big December issue of

REAL WESTERN STORIES

SPECIAL FEATURE

PHANTOM FOE

by Nan Baker

THE NIGHT had settled darkly, and the smallest sound was amplified a hundred fold. A force of Confederate soldiers were advancing slowly and stealthily through the little wooded glen. Closer and closer they drew to their objective—a pineboard church in Dunksburg, Missouri. Having sighted its drab spire above the trees, the area was surrounded in a matter of moments and the command was given to fire.

The year was 1862; Civil War was upon the nation. Brother fought brother, father fought son, and passions ran high. It was a dangerous period in which to favor the cause opposite that of your own locality. Despite this, a small German colony in Missouri dared to be Pro-Union among their rebel neighbors.

Nearby Confederate regulars, hearing of the situation, decided to wipe out the German Unionists and make of them an example for others. Thus on one favorable night, Secessionist troops advanced through the woods to the little gray church where the Germans were believed to have taken refuge. There were no lights in the windows, no sound coming from inside, not

a trace of movement anywhere. The commander tensed for a moment and wondered if his information had been correct. Were the Germans here after all? Were the Pro-Union Dutchies just hiding?

There was only one way to find out: attack! With the building completely surrounded, and all his men behind a good cover of trees and bushes, the young Confederate gave the command to open fire.

The retort of guns was terrific and gray coated soldiers dropped heavily from behind their protective screens. Within minutes, the loss of life was so great that retreat was sounded. A little way beyond the objective, the remaining forces congregated to wonder at the fierce defense they had encountered. Finally with Southern determination, pride and pure stubbornness, these remaining forces crept back to their posts for the second—and what was to be—final attack.

This time they were determined to be more wary. No one would expose himself to the German marksmen and casualties would occur only in the church.

But as soon as firing started, rebel

militia dropped like the proverbial flies. Desperately the command was given to storm the church in a final bayonet charge. With much scrambling, and with caution thrown to the winds, the remaining forces rose up and broke free of cover, galloping full ahead for the splintered church. Two officers leading the onslaught, reached the high plank doors and threw themselves through.

Imagine their stunned surprise to find the building empty. The Germans, forewarned of the sneak attack, had withdrawn from that quarter long before the troops arrival. Confederate casualties had been caused by their *own balls* passing through the walls of the church and hitting fellow soldiers on the other side!



Bar Circle Thanksgiving

"I can't think of a Thanksgivin',
Since I've worked with pan an' pot,"
Cookie snorted, "when I haven't
Served up turkey pipin' hot;
That's my record!" Peters grumbled,
While the blizzard fiercely blew,
"Gosh! The pip got all the turkeys
Hereabouts but what Hodge grew,
An' a coyote croaked them Monday—
You've heard all of this before,
So you know there ain't no turkeys
Save the one at Hod Merk's store."

"There's no buyin' him!" sighed Mustang,
"We've all tried an' done our best;
Hod will feast on him tomorrow,
Till he busts his checkered vest."
"By himself, too," Smokey muttered.
"Huh! The fat, big-bellied hog!"
"Quit your jawin'!" cookie shouted,
Croakin' like a bloated frog,
"Beat it out of here, you waddies!
Use your heads! Keep out of sight!"
An' the poker he was swingin'
Had us buckin' through the night.

After breakfast the next mornin'
Cookie promptly kicked us out,
But he summoned us to dinner
From the bunkhouse with a shout,
An' we found a turk with fixin's
Lifin' up some fragrant smell;
While Merk spluttered in a corner,
Cookie chuckled, "What the hell!
Though the blizzard was rough goin'
An' our woodshed worse, in fact,
Hod, forget my gun! Start stuffin'
Men, my record's still intact!"

— Edgar Daniel Kramer

WOMEN TAKE FOOL CHANCES

Ann couldn't shake off the feeling that something was going to happen today.



She couldn't run, or even move — it seemed as though her heart had turned to stone.

by Helene Huff

ANN WASN'T a girl who believed in premonitions. She pooh-pooed them. After all, she reasoned, you can't live in a new country and be a scared sissy. Or, if you were, you wouldn't be weak-kneed enough to show it, much less admit it.

This morning she awoke feeling de-

liciously full of life. The birds twittered happily and the trees were adorned with new spring outfits of green leaves. Even her rosebush that she'd watered the past six months since they'd been here in the Indian Reservation in Oklahoma was budding forth with new vigor.

She stretched, feeling her firm, rounded body respond to the call of Spring. Jerry slept at her side, his dark hair tousled like a child's, an expres-

sion of happiness on his long face with the quizzical eyebrows. She reached out and touched him and he opened dark smiling eyes.

Ann's smile was brilliant.

The moment of quiet was broken as Chris bounded with an Indian call in the middle of the bed. He grinned at them, his eight-year-old face a copy of Ann's with fine blond hair and twinkling hazel eyes.

"Off, boy," Jerry said lazily. "Have to get an early start this morning." He kicked back the covers.

A chill went through Ann. "Mike, get dressed." Her thoughts turmoiled. Often Jerry left her alone all day and she hadn't minded. What was it about his announcement today that brought terror to her mind?

She licked her lips. "Where are you going?" She got out of bed heavily, keeping her back turned while she dressed rapidly.

"Have to get a load of firewood. Supply's low."

"Yes." She'd forgotten she'd asked him several days ago to get more wood.

She drew a deep breath. "Jerry." Her voice was hesitant. "Couldn't you wait until tomorrow? I thought we might put in the garden today."

He raised his eyebrows. "Can't do it, Ann. We might have a spell of bad weather. Besides, I have to start plowing tomorrow. You know we have to raise some sort of crop to sell for cash. We're about out of money and we need supplies."

His voice was entirely too patient to suit Ann. He was treating her like a child. Her voice rose in anger. "I guess the cash wouldn't help any if something happened to Mike and me while you were gone today."

He was impatient. "What's gotten into you?"

Ann felt quick tears sting her eyes. She brushed them away. "You're so dedicated to being a frontiersman, you forget what it is for a woman to be

stuck in the middle of nowhere without friends." Suddenly tears flowed. "If you really loved me, you'd understand. If I just had some real friend, somebody closeby whom I could talk to. Even someone around when I needed him—or her. I'm lonesome," she sobbed, "and you neglect me shamefully!"

Jerry looked uncomfortable. He tried to take Ann in his arms, but she stiffened and backed away. "It's because of you, mainly, because we wanted a good future for ourselves and Mike that we decided to come West. I thought. . . ."

Ann blew her nose.

He continued. "I thought you were happy here. I didn't know you were miserable and lonely." He bit his lip.

"I don't want you to go today. That's all I ask. I'll be all right if you'll stay home. Just for today," Ann pleaded. "I didn't mean all those ugly things I said. Honest, I didn't, Jerry. It's just that I have a feeling that something's brewing. And I don't want to be alone."

Jerry's shoulders drooped. "There's nothing I wouldn't do for you, Ann. You know that. But we have to think ahead. Today's no different from any other day."

Ann started to answer, when Mike ran into the room, fully dressed for a day with Jerry. "Where you going, Dad? Can I go with you? Can I?"

"May, Mike," Ann corrected.

Jerry looked at Mike a minute or two. "Not today."

"Oh, Dad. Why not?"

"You're old enough now to be the man of the house while I'm gone. People say the Indians are entirely harmless around here, but I'd feel better if a man was around to watch out for your Mother. And," he added, "to keep her company so she won't get too lonely."

The disappointed expression on Mike's face changed to one of pride and his chest visibly expanded. He

spoke seriously, "Well, now, Dad. I hadn't thought of it like that."

Ann smiled, almost against her will. Her love for her two men enveloped her life. And she couldn't think of any life without them.

Jerry raised his eyebrows and winked at Ann while Mike ate intently. Her lips silently formed the words, "I love you," and Jerry said, "Me, too."

"I guess," Mike said, "I better bring in Diamond this afternoon at milking time since you might be late."

"Oh, no!" Ann spoke involuntarily. "I'll go." She ignored Jerry's startled glance. It was much too dangerous for Mike to go into the tall grass to hunt Diamond, so named because it was difficult to get a cow in this country unless you brought her with you.

For the first time since she could remember, Jerry ignored her opinion. "Sure, Mike. You do that. I'll be back before dark."

Ann pursed her lips in annoyance, and Jerry kissed the stubborn lips and patted her shoulder as he headed for the door. He took one rifle and left the other in the corner behind the rocking chair.

THE DAY passed slowly. Ann couldn't shake off her feeling that something terrible was going to happen today. She should have insisted that Jerry stay home, but she knew he wouldn't even then. Sluggishly she went about the household chores, glancing out the door from time to time to watch Mike playing in the yard.

She didn't have her heart in it, but soon she called for him to come in. "Time for your lessons," she urged.

Mike came slowly, draping a short piece of rope behind him. "Sometimes," he announced, "I wish you hadn't been a teacher back East. I wish you didn't know anything about lessons."

Even though Ann was used to his mumbling about lessons, her words were sharp today. "You want to spend

the rest of your life being a woodsman here on the outskirts of civilization?" She bit her tongue, but it was too late. The words were said.

"But gee, Mom. You tell Dad he's brave and ambitious and fine because he wants to carve a future in a new country..."

"That's right, Mike. But he had to have an education before he knew a good thing when he saw it. And you have to have it too."

The morning passed and after lunch, with the dishes dried, Ann mended, then dug in the dry, crusty earth in the backyard. She'd brought flower seeds and garden seeds with her. She patted the last mound as the sun started its descent in the West.

"Mike," she called. "It's time to get Diamond."

He came around the corner of the log cabin. "I was thinking, Mom, if you don't really want me to get her, I won't."

Her laughter was light, although her heart was heavy. "Why, Mike. Of course, you may get her." She looked at him, and his eyes shied away from hers. Suddenly, she knew what was wrong. Mike was scared. She breathed deeply. Jerry had told her all along that unless she expected the best of Mike, he would never develop. Was it her fault that fear was in him now?

She put an arm around his shoulders. "It won't take long, Mike. You've been with your Dad enough to know where Diamond usually is, and her bell will lead you to her. While you're gone, I'll fix an extra-special supper. Maybe we'll have your favorite pie."

A grin spread over Mike's face. "Gee, Mom. I'll hurry. It won't take any time. And don't you worry a bit. I'll be all right." His lower lip quivered only slightly as he asserted, "I wouldn't want you to think I'm scared. I'm not. I just didn't want to leave you by yourself."

Ann nodded her head seriously. "I understand. Now run. And don't stay

long." She patted him on the seat and headed him toward the field.

She knew he didn't honestly want to get Diamond. Sometimes Indians stalked around and often they hid in the tall grass that waved continually in the wind. That's what made it so dangerous. You couldn't tell whether it was the wind making the grass move or whether it was Indians moving around in it.

Ann shivered. It was cruel to send a child there alone. But he had to learn sometime. She couldn't protect him always in this new country. Determinedly she went into the cabin and worked quickly in the kitchen.

Her mind followed Mike as he entered the tall grass. She hoped Diamond hadn't wandered to the creek bed where the weeds grew the highest.

She sighed. She was glad Jerry had tied the bell around Diamond's neck. It rang almost continually. If Mike would follow the sound of the bell and didn't get interested in collecting more rocks, he should be back almost any minute now.

THEN A THOUGHT came to her that chilled her. Every night when Jerry went for Diamond, he carried his rifle. And she had sent a mere child into that jungle of weeds that were taller than he unarmed with anything except supreme self-confidence.

She grabbed the rifle and ran out the backdoor, down the path and into the tall grass. She hesitated, listening for Diamond's bell. Then she heard a gentle tinkle. She ran toward the sound which came from the tall clump of grass near the creek.

Then she was covered by the high grass. She stopped suddenly, fear running down her backbone and to the tips of her toes. Her heart beat rapidly and her breath panted in short gasps.

It wasn't Diamond ringing her bell! She wasn't in sight. It was Indians! Two Redskins sat on the grassy slope

of the bank, shaking the bell gently. Their heads were held to one side and they grinned and held the bell close to their ears with each new sound.

Mike lay on his stomach near the men, closely inspecting the colorful feather headdress one of the Indians had taken off.

Sweat popped out on Ann's forehead when she tried to scream. No sound came out of her mouth. She couldn't run or even move. It seemed as though her legs had turned to stone.

She stood still, hardly breathing, and stared at the Indians who, suddenly looking up, saw her. Ann thought maybe it was all a horrible nightmare. She rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand. She noticed the Indians had a cowbell just like the one Diamond wore. That's how they had tricked Mike and her into this trap in the high grass.

Ann glanced around, trying to decide the best thing to do. Then she saw Diamond staring at her with big sad eyes, calmly chewing several blades of grass. She still had the rope around her neck but the bell that hung from it was gone.

Now stealing that bell from Diamond made Ann so mad she completely forgot about being scared. Metals and bells, as well as everything else, was much too difficult to get in Indian Territory. She couldn't let those Indians steal the bell right in front of her eyes like they were doing.

She lifted her chin and stared at the Indians. They grinned and grunted, nodding their heads and holding the bell up so that it rang clearly.

"Hey, Mom," Mike called, just noticing her. "They borrowed Diamond's bell. They like it fine. And look at me." He had the feather headpiece on his blond hair and started a war dance around the Indians, whooping and laughing, his blue eyes crinkled in delight.

Smiles spread over the Indians' faces and they nimbly got to their feet and

joined Mike in the dance, the lead Indian jangling the bell in time.

Ann was petrified as they headed toward her and started dancing around her. "Oh, my," she thought weakly. "They've got me cornered and Mike's helping. And he doesn't know what he's doing."

"Stop it!" she cried. "Stop it this minute. You hear?"

Mike stopped and grabbed the two Indians by the hands. They looked puzzled.

Ann realized she held the rifle in a limp hand. Slowly she raised it to her hip. Looking the Indians straight in the eyes, she said slowly, her voice shaking only slightly, "Give me that bell."

The Indians looked at one another and shrugged. Then they looked at Ann and grunted. The one holding the bell swung it and the tinkling sound made Ann furious.

SHE STOOD stiffly as the Indians effortlessly sat down cross-legged on the ground. They watched her, not moving a muscle. Then Diamond moaned. She moaned long and loud, again and again.

"Gee, Mom," Mike said. "Don't go pointing that gun at them. They're my friends." He crossed his hands across his chest and the Indians bobbed their heads up and down, crossing their chests with strong, brawny arms. They grinned up at Ann.

Then one Indian stood up and started toward her. Ann quivered. She mustn't let them get the rifle or the upper hand, but she mustn't let Mike see she was terrified.

With great dignity, the Indian took off his feather headpiece and placed it gently on Ann's head. He moved back a step, surveying her, then adjusted the headpiece and stepped away smiling.

Involuntarily, Ann returned the smile. They did seem like harmless children.

Then almost like the leaves falling

off the trees in the autumn, Ann was aware of the two Indians slipping away so quietly she hardly heard them.

She sprang after one and grabbed his bare foot, yelling, "You give me that bell!" The Indian stumbled and lay on the ground, looking at Ann as a hurt dog looks at his master. He motioned to the feathers adorning Ann's head and then pointed to the bell in his hand.

"Gee, Mom," Mike exclaimed. "Can't you understand plain English? He's telling you he traded his feathers for the bell. And look, I've got feathers too!"

Ann felt like a fool. The other Indian stood over her, looking puzzled.

"Speak English?" she asked, getting to her feet.

Even white teeth showed against brown skin as they smiled and nodded.

"Friends?"

They nodded, rang the bell and crossed their chests.

"Come with me." She beckoned them to follow. She paused. "Mike, bring Diamond."

JERRY was waiting in the yard as the four came into view. Ann was amused as a frightened look crossed his face. "Run!" he called excitedly. "Make a run for the house. I'll cover you!"

Ann straightened the feathers on her head. "Why, Jerry," she said soothingly, "whatever are you so excited about?"

"Have you lost your wits?" Jerry held the rifle steady. "Get inside while you can. Take Mike and don't fool around."

Turning her back to him, Ann motioned to the Indians to come forward. She took them by the hand. "Jerry, put that gun down. Mike, take Diamond to the lot. And hurry back. Supper's almost ready." Turning to Jerry, she said, "These two gentlemen have come to eat with us." At Jerry's open mouth,

she continued. "Close your mouth. They're here at my invitation."

"But," Jerry licked dry lips. "Indians are dangerous. You're walking into a trap."

"These Indians are friends."

At the word, "friends," the Indians grinned, bobbed their heads and crossed their chests with their arms.

Jerry's let-out breath was audible and Ann smiled. "As you've told me all along, the Indian Reservation is as safe as main street back home. And the people, I've found, are just as eager to make friends as we are."

Slowly Jerry shook his head. "Somehow, I got the feeling you were scared this morning, and here you come in with a batch of feathers."

Ann's skirts swished pass him as she went into the cabin. "My goodness, I wonder whatever gave you such an idea."

After supper Ann did the dishes while the four men sat watching her. Mike was chirping excitedly telling Jerry about the afternoon adventure.

As darkness settled over the log cabin, Jerry stretched and said it was time for bed. He glanced toward Ann. "What do we do with them?" He indicated the Indians.

She dug into a box and found a piece of strong cord. Walking toward the Indian still holding the bell, she took it from his reluctant hand. Running the cord through the hole at the top of the bell, she tied it around the Indian's neck.

He beamed, shaking his head, a delighted expression on his face as he heard the bell ring. She motioned the two to follow her. They walked outside. Ann waved her hand in farewell. They returned the gesture and stood still. She shut the door and leaned her back against it, humming happily.

"They are nice, aren't they?"

Jerry exploded. "No telling what they'll do tonight."

Ann tilted her head, hearing the bell. "They won't do a thing except go back

to their wigwams. Besides, we can hear the bell whenever they move if they stay here."

They heard the sound of the bell drift away in the distance, and then all was quiet.

THE NEXT morning Ann was happier than she had been in weeks. "I suppose," she explained at the breakfast table, "it's because we had guests last night. And such nice ones too!"

"You are in a bad way if a couple of Redskins can revive your spirits. I'll ride around, after I get in the row crop, and see if some of the other settlers can't come here for a get-together."

Ann's eyes sparkled. "That would be wonderful. We can talk and quilt while you men whittle wood and tell tall-tales."

She got up for the coffee when the faint tinkling of Diamond's bell came nearer and nearer. She opened the door and looked out. Her two friends strolled across the yard, smiling and holding out a couple of rabbits.

"Jerry, come here. They've come for breakfast. Not only that, but they've brought meat!"

"Well, I'll be doggoned." Jerry grinned. "They might be handy to have around. I wonder. . . ."

Ann spoke softly. "Do you think we could? Do you think they would?"

She motioned them inside. They entered hesitantly. Again, they sat awkwardly on the boxes around the table. They started eating with their fingers, then watched closely while Ann and Jerry and Mike used the silver. Almost timidly, Ann saw them pick up the knife and fork and try to shovel food onto them. She walked around the table and showed each how to hold the knife and fork.

Their first attempt to get the food from the plate to their mouths on the fork was a grand event. They stood up and raised their arms in thanks to Ann. She lowered her eyes.

After breakfast they cleaned the rabbits and then followed Jerry out to the field. Ann watched as Jerry put one to work fencing while the other one plowed. He was busy supervising. The Indians' muscles rippled smoothly under smooth, tanned skin. Toward the middle of the morning Ann called, "Mike. Come take water out to your Dad and our new friends."

"Gee, Mom," Mike said excitedly. "Are they going to live here with us?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. But wouldn't it be nice if they did?"

"Gee!" He ran down the path, carrying the bucket of water.

THE DAYS passed swiftly after that. Jerry sang at night, playing his guitar while the Indians clapped their hands and danced in the kitchen. Mike imitated their every move. The row crop was planted and the small field was fenced.

And the Indians slept in the lean-to near the lot where Diamond stayed.

Ann prepared meat every day. Each morning before Ann and Jerry arose, the Indians stole silently across the plains and returned with meat. Sometimes it was prairie chickens or turkey or deer. Mike usually tagged along. He learned to track and to kill game and other Indian skills. And, always, Ann knew the Indians were gentle and patient with Mike and that he was in good hands.

Then one morning the bell didn't tinkle and the Indians didn't appear for breakfast. Ann went out to the pen where they had built the lean-to, but it was empty. Tears slid down her face as she fixed breakfast.

"They're gone," she told Jerry, feeling as though she had lost members of her immediate family.

Jerry's lips tightened. "Maybe something happened to them. They're such trusting men—almost like children wanting love—that something bad might have overtaken them. Mike and I will go out and hunt them today."

They ate hurriedly, hardly tasting the food. Ann stood in the door, watching her two men, each carrying a rifle, disappear from sight. She prayed the Indians were safe and that they would be found.

In the middle of the afternoon as Ann sat listless and tired on the kitchen steps, she heard the sound of a bell tinkling in the distance. She straightened, holding her breath. When the Indians saw her, they broke into a run, their arms full.

She ran out to meet them, a smile playing around her lips. They babbled, laughing and gesturing. Then they lay their bundles on the ground and took two lovely heavy necklaces from around their necks and ceremoniously put them over her head. Tears stung her eyes. She raised herself on tiptoe and kissed each of them on the cheek. They backed away looking embarrassed, but pleased.

They picked up their bundles and selected a spot in the backyard. Then they set to work. Amazed, Ann watched as they put up their wigwam near the lean-to and straightened their other meager possessions neatly inside.

She said a silent prayer. They had come to make their home with them. Wouldn't Jerry and Mike be delighted?

And they were, just as she expected. Jerry's complete depression disappeared when he saw the wigwam standing in the yard, and Mike was all set to move in with the Indians immediately, but he was restrained.

That night in bed, Jerry said lazily, "Women take such fool chances. Like bringing those Indians home that day a couple of weeks ago. I guess God must watch over you."

"Of course," Ann said calmly, kissing the tip of Jerry's nose. "I wonder," she mused contentedly, "just what you men would do without us women?"

She stretched contentedly as Jerry answered with relaxed snores.



A Monument To Atrocity

Special Feature by Luran Paine



DURING the summer of 1874, one-hundred and seventy five years after it happened, the citizens of Massachusetts and New Hampshire erected a handsome monument showing a colonial housewife in the act of striking a sleeping Indian with a tomahawk, while her left hand held a sodden clutch of scalps. This proud creation commemorated the courage of Hannah Dustin, Mary Neff, and eleven-year-old Samuel Leonardson.

The Dustins lived in a sod-and-log cabin at the outskirts of Haverhill when, March 15th. 1697—the last year of King William's War—an attack was launched against the farm. Mr. Dustin was plowing in the field when the Indians struck. He cut loose his horse, leaped aboard and dashed to the cabin, where he ordered his wife, Hannah, and her nurse, Mary Neff, to run for their lives. Hannah was confined to bed with her infant, following childbirth and begged her husband to take the other children and flee—which he was forced to do. He and the children escaped, although the kids had to run many miles along the road before they reached safety, while their father shot it out with the pursuing Indians.

Mary Neff and Hannah Dustin were both taken alive. Hannah's newborn infant was taken to a tree near the cabin, swung through the air by his ankles and had his head crushed

against the trunk. He was then tossed into a thicket and forgotten. The two women were forced to accompany the savages in their retreat back into the forest, and the invincible Hannah Dustin—although weak and hemorrhaging badly—staggered along under threat of imminent death if she lagged.

When the marauding bands met at their pre-arranged rendezvous, it was discovered that, altogether, the Indians had thirteen prisoners. They were culled and apportioned. Hannah Dustin, Mary Neff and a young boy named Samuel Leonardson, were given to one band which promptly took to the woods and marched continuously for several days, until they had put roughly one-hundred and fifty miles between themselves and Haverhill.

That Hannah Dustin survived at all, is a miracle, but it can be partly attributed to one young Indian buck who helped her along during the day, then tried to rape her each night. Hannah was no fool; she had seen how readily her captors killed anyone who crossed them. While guarding herself as best she could against attack, she nevertheless avoided alienating the young buck, and encouraged him to brag—a feat evidently easily accomplished.

Having wormed her way into the confidence of the Indians, Hannah Dustin convinced her particular swain that she thought he was wonderful, and asked him how Indians scalped people so deftly. The Indian touched his dark temple and told Hannah a sharp blow there would either kill, or render unconscious, any enemy. Next, he pulled his knife and showed her, in pantomime, how to circle the skull at the

hair line, flesh under the scalp with the point of the knife and pull sharply. He accompanied this careful coaching with a popping sound with his mouth that indicated how the scalp would come off the skull. Hannah was enthralled and her swain was elated, too.

HANNAH DUSTIN, Mary Neff and eleven-year-old Samuel Leonardson had decided to escape. They knew they were getting close to their captors' village and had been told how they would be treated there—which included the droll little ritual of running the gauntlet for the entire village, which normally resulted in the victim being clubbed to death.

Consequently, Hannah, Mary, and young Samuel, lay down on their beds of pine needles, the last night, with quiet desperation. By preconceived signal, when the small hours of the night were on them, Hannah arose, touched Mary Neff and Samuel, lightly, and the three of them stole among the Indians. They picked up three tomahawks and, at a nod from Hannah, struck fiercely at three temples. The Indians quivered briefly and lay still. Warm blood gushed from their shattered skulls. Next, the two women and the boy singled out three more savages and struck again. This accounted for six of the twelve captors. With blood sticking to their hands and splotched on their faces, the killer struck again.

This time Mary Neff's nerves were getting raw, and she struck too low; her victim let out a yell and bounded to his feet. However, since he was stunned, Mary was able to keep hacking until she had killed him. But the dying man's screams aroused the two remaining Indians, who leaped up and ran like deer, into the woods.

Hannah was breathing heavily from her labors and her clothes were splat-

tered. Assembling her friends, she fled to a river where the savages had cached some canoes. There, they scuttled all but one and jumped in and shoved off.

They hadn't gone a mile, when Hannah Dustin turned the canoe around. Mary Neff looked up quickly. "Where are you going?"

"We didn't scalp them."

Mary was horrified "What difference does that make?"

Hannah paddled onward. "When we tell our friends that we killed ten Indians, they'll want some proof."

Mary Neff, quaking with fear, tried to plead with Hannah but the Dustin woman paddled vigorously back toward their point of embarkation. Samuel Leonardson, boy-like, was all for scalping real Indians.

Their former camp was anything but merry when they returned. Hannah fell to work quickly and intently, appropriating the Indians' knives as she went from one to another. It was almost dawn when they tramped back to the canoe, loaded in several knives, a tomahawk, a long rifle, and a sheave of scalps.

When Hannah, Mary and Samuel returned to their homes they were welcomed as persons returned from the dead. The Dustins were re-united—all except the baby whose brains had been knocked out—and resumed life where it had been interrupted. A little later, Hannah went to Boston with her dried trophies and was given a bounty of fifty pounds. Likewise, Mary Neff and Samuel Leonardson.

Governor Nicholson, also by way of appreciation, sent Hannah a pewter tankard as an indication of esteem. But Hannah Dustin didn't really get her reward until the statue of her, holding the scalps and the sticky tomahawk, was erected almost two-hundred years after she had performed her "courageous" deed.

TRICK DRAW

by J. J. Mathews

Curly wasn't afraid, old Niles Justin found — but the kid wasn't experienced enough with guns to go up against Wolf Gault. Somehow, he had to be kept out of Gault's way until he was ready . . .

THE PLACER bar was busy for a mid-week night, and most of the gambling tables were going, too. Old Niles Justin tilted his chair back against a post. Slightly to his left, a five-handed poker game was in session, and Niles didn't like the nasty squinting of Wolf Gault; Wolf had too many knots on his tally-string.

"An' that lad Curly ain't got the sense to keep from hornin' right into trouble," Justin muttered to himself.

An abrupt, heavy-fisted slapping of hands at cards jarred the table. Each



poker player suddenly kicked back his chair and was solidly on his feet.

Three of the players backed away quickly, leaving only Wolf Gault and young Bloch. Wolf's gun was jutting out from his right hip, its big black barrel ready to spit a slug through Curly Bloch's chest, across the table.

"He ain't heeled, Wolf."

Old Niles Justin was still tilted back against the post. Apparently he hadn't moved, yet his old-fashioned Colt .45 was steadied across one of his cocked-up knees. A fannin' gun—that Colt. No need of pulling a trigger; there wasn't any, anyway. The hammer had to be fanned with the heel of the other hand, or thumbed back with the thumb of the gun hand. Niles had the hammer back now. All he had to do was let his thumb slip and the old cannon would drill Wolf Gault through the heart.

Gault's blazing eyes flashed toward Justin and back to Curly Bloch.

"Then git heeled, or stay outta town, young squirt," Gault snarled. "'Cause I'm comin' at yuh smokin', on sight."

Holstering his gun, Wolf Gault wheeled and stomped toward the bar.

"Reckon we'd better be a-moseyin', kid." Niles got to his feet and holstered his own gun.

Curly Bloch turned his long lean frame from the table, where he had stood, bent forward, with both hands upon the top. Niles Justin was stopped for an instant by the hard glint in the

younger man's blue-gray eyes; he hadn't been aware that those eyes could do anything but smile. Curly settled his Stetson a bit more firmly over his wavy brown hair, rammed his hands into his pants' pockets and followed the old cowman from the *Placer*.

OUT IN the darkened street, and several doors from the saloon, Niles Justin spat into the dust and growled: "Reckon yuh'd best ride, and ride hard, young fellah. Git up across th' border, soon as yuh can. Tell th' boss that th' grass in this yere valley he leased is makin' beef, an' to send me another man. Reckon me an' Grady an' Mercer can hold th' herd for a spell."

"Niles, that—"

"Tell th' boss yuh wasn't ready for this job. He'll understand; he's been under fire, hisself."

"That hombre had the ace of spades palmed in his left hand."

"Eh-heh. That don't s'prise me none. Yuh gotta look out for them kind o' things in these yere kind o' towns. That Wolf Gault is a regular killer. Best thing is to ease out of a game like that one, 'less yuh are heeled. Wolf shore wouldda drilled yuh, if yuh had been."

"But I was heeled."

"What'd yuh say, young fella?"

"I said I *was* heeled."

"Hey?" Justin snapped the back of a hand against the left side of Curly Bloch's leather vest. His knuckles rapped against nothing but good solid ribs. There was no gun there in a shoulder holster. There was no gun swinging at either of the younger man's hips. Niles had never seen Bloch have a gun.

"What yuh headin' at Curly?"

"I—said I was heeled. I still am."

"Wh—"

"Shore. Look." Curly Bloch stopped and slid his right hand from his pants' pocket. In the palm lay a little .32 automatic.

"Well of all the hornswogglin' young jackasses! A-packin' iron an' not goin' for it 'fore callin' a crooked deal. If I had knowed yuh had that—tarnation! I gotta notion to chase yuh right back to th' *Placer*."

"All right." Curly Bloch turned. "You hold off his gang, and I'll bust up th' Wolf's nest." Justin grabbed one of Curly's arms.

"No, boy. Yuh made kind o' a durned fool outta me, but I ain't sendin' yuh to be plain murdered. Not with that there toy pistol. What yuh needs is a Colt."

"This is a Colt." Curly again produced the little gun, with the flip of a hand.

"It's a danged toy pistol, that's all that there thing is! One of them new-fangled slab-sided playthings. What I mean is a reg'lar hawg-laig—a six-gun."

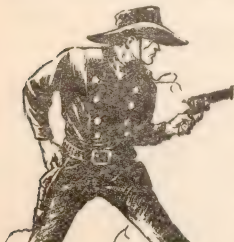
They were just beyond the last of the town's single block of frame and adobe store buildings, within forty yards of where their horses were tied. Niles stood shifting his weight from one none-too-long, bowed leg to the other, muttering: "I'm gettin' 'long in years; gettin' a wee bit slow, too. But I reckon I'd best go back. I'd a danged sight ruther brace up to Wolf, than to have him gunnin' fur me. An' he's shore a-goin' to be doin' just that, when he finds out yuh was heeled, after I was so consarned shore yuh wasn't, an' blatted it out." Then, a trifle frantically and much louder, "Hey! Come back 'ere."

Curly Bloch quickened his step, avoiding Justin's reaching hands, as the old cowman waddled after him. But Curly was heading diagonally across the street toward Waddell's general store, where lights still burned, instead of the *Placer*.

It was all right to carry a hidden gun with another slung right out in sight. That was the code. Curly Bloch realized it now. And Niles thought he hadn't gone for his pocket pistol be-

cause he was afraid. Damn! It just hadn't occurred to him. Guns were for use on snakes and coyotes, and the little automatic was all right, if a fellow kept it clean and knew how to use it. He'd gotten it because he was curious about this little, new-type gun.

Waddell was closing his store, shoving out a few hangers-on, as Curly crowded in through the door. Justin followed close upon his heels. Confound old Niles! Chase him back up over the border to the boss, would he? And then take up the quarrel. There wasn't a chance in a thousand that Wolf Gault would ever have found out about the automatic. But Niles would see that he did, to save his own face. That was some more of the old cowman's stiffnecked code.



WADDELL had plenty of guns. They were locked in a cupboard, over behind the counter on the right-hand side of the store. Curly picked out a heavy .45 caliber double-action six-gun; the latest thing out. Niles grunted in disapproval. And, when Curly bought a new open top holster, he snorted in disgust.

Curly looked at Niles. The old fellow stood leaning slightly against the counter, his eyes hard to the left, watching the front door. And Justin

had his gun unholstered, had it pointing toward the door across his front under the counter's edge. His only intelligible words, while in the store, were to Waddell, after the purchases were made.

"Wrop 'em up," Niles told Waddell, "an' let us out th' back way."

Curly Bloch had been about to buckle the holster belt around his waist, but Niles glared him out of that idea and whipped his eyes again to the front door. It wasn't until after they had slipped out and around behind all of the buildings to their horses that Justin explained.

"Yuh'd go bustin' right out after Wolf with that there new cannon, huh? When I 'scovered yuh had a gun an' hadn't went fur it, I thought mebbe yuh was—a bit skeered. But I reckon yuh just hain't got no sense 'tall."

"Where're you goin'?" Curly asked, as Niles swung into his saddle and wheeled his horse from the hitchrail.

"Out to th' cabin, yuh dingbusted young fool. An' we're a-goin' to stay out there, till yuh've had some lessons, and done a sight of practisin'. Yuh couldn't yank that gun outta that new half-breed holster with both hands 'fore— Why, Wolf'd have yuh drilled three, four times, 'n' then there wouldn't be one bit o' use. Hit yore saddle, Bloch."

Curly Bloch grinned in the darkness, but he tied his package to the horn of his saddle and followed Niles. They swung away from the road, a mile out, yet the trail was wide and they rode stirrup to stirrup. Curly's horse was a sensitive, raw-boned chestnut. As they rode past a spread of chaparral, the horse leaped into a dead run. Justin had lurched over and lashed it across the rump.

Curly hadn't seen the red flash of the gun, but he heard the report and knew it had come from the thicket. Justin's horse was thundering along, close behind. Curly pulled his own horse to a lope.

Niles raced up abreast, bending low in his saddle, hatless. "Rifle," he bellowed above the pounding of the horses' hooves.

"Who—" Curly was pulling in his horse but Justin reached out and lashed it again.

"Wolf, yuh danged idjit! Or one of his gang. He knows yuh bought that haw-laig. Short cut. Pot shot. I'm sore 'cause they got my best hat, dang it."

Curly Bloch gritted his teeth. Old Niles Justin might have lost more than his hat, might have been left lying back there in the road—so might he—and it was all his fault. Then Curly grinned once more into the darkness, as they gave their horses their heads for a ways.

Grady opened one eye and blinked at them from his bunk as old Justin and Curly Bloch came into the cabin.

"Somethin' chasin' th' two o' yuh?" Grady asked, squinting in the light of the lantern.

"Shut yore trap an' go to sleep," Niles growled and made ready for a bit of shut-eye himself, in a manner which choked off any talk.

WHEN THE cook routed them out for breakfast the next morning, Curly was surprised to realize that he had been able to go immediately to sleep the night before. "That's what comes from having a clear conscience, I s'pose," he mused and smiled to himself.

"What yuh grinnin' at, Curly? If it's the cut uv my—"

"Yuh hush yore self, Grady, an' listen," Justin growled.

As Niles told of the happenings of the evening before, Grady's face sobered. He looked over Curly's new gun and holster. "Too danged stiff," he mumbled, with reference to the holster, and took it and pounded it, then greased it thoroughly on the inside with tallow.

"Put it on, kid," Niles ordered, as Bloch prepared to go out and relieve

Mercer. "An' keep th' danged thing on. An' take a few quick pots at somethin' that's movin'. Get th' feel of that there new cannon. But don't go skeerin' the critters."

Curly Bloch wore his new gun continually. He began to feel natural, with its weight thonged against his right thigh, although he was not altogether unfamiliar with a six-gun. He had worn one on the range before. But he grew weary of the paces which old Niles Justin and Grady insisted on putting him through.

Mercer came into the cabin one rainy day, when the cattle were close in. Niles and Curly were facing each other across the length of the single room. Grady was there, too. Grady had a pan, and whenever he banged it against the wall, Niles and Curly would go for their empty guns.

Invariably, Justin's gun clicked two or three times before Bloch's. Then Niles would shake his head and make some cutting remark.

Finally, Mercer asked: "Whyn't yuh let 'im try for th' cross draw, same as Wolf uses hisself? Strap his gun high up, on th' left, butt for'ard. He can go for it mo' ca'less-like, then."

So they tried that. It was an improvement. The next day he was sure that his gun had clicked in unison with Justin's. He tried it with Grady and got the same results. He later tried it with Mercer and beat him to the click several times. Curly began to smile to himself and to practice, when the others weren't around, along lines of his own.

"Reckon Wolf wouldn't be so anxious to sight yuh, now, if he knew—"

"He's sighting me Saturday night," Curly Bloch grinned across their breakfasts at Mercer, a couple days later.

"Tomorry night?"

"Yep," Curly answered. "That's the Saturday night I'm naming."

"Yuh dangbusted idjit," Niles Justin snapped and began to argue.

Arguing didn't do any good. Old Niles could fire him, if he wanted to, he was the foreman. But Curly Bloch was going into town the next evening.

Secretly, old Niles looked at the younger man and began to make plans. Curly Bloch had the stuff. He had liked the slender young fellow, ever since the boss had sent him down here.



IT WAS NILES who grew restless as Saturday evening arrived. An extra man had been hired to night ride the herd, and Grady was sent into town an hour in advance.

Grady was waiting at the hitching-rail, on the near side of the first store building, when old Niles Justin, Curly Bloch and Mercer rode in, shortly after dark.

Grady had been nosing around. Wolf Gault was in town. And he had a couple of his buddies trailing along with him, close up. But Wolf wasn't in the *Placer*; he was over at Sloan's corral, dealing for some horses.

"But he'll be over to th' *Placer* right soon, 'cause he handed me th' invite to sit in a poker game. Asked me if I was by myself. Course I was—right then." Grady laughed, in a chuckling fashion, as he finished.

"Eh-heh. Sorta s'picious, wasn't he?" Niles scratched his bristly chin and gave a few orders. Mercer was to loaf

outside the front door of the *Placer*. Grady by the side door, through which Wolf would probably enter, coming from the corral. If either saw Wolf approaching, he was to step inside quickly. That would give Curly Bloch warning.

Niles himself, was sticking with Curly. They went directly to the *Placer* and boldly entered. Justin passed a few "howdys" around and slumped into his favorite chair against a post. Curly stood leaning back against the bar, rolling a cigarette. He kept a sharp lookout on the doors.

Bloch snapped a match, lit his freshly rolled cigarette and puffed out a cloud of smoke. Over the heads of the crowd, he saw Grady's big gray hat. Wolf Gault was coming.

Curly's nerves began to tingle, his jaw muscles hardened. He saw Wolf moving toward him. The crowd opened up a path and then made for the doors. The barman disappeared behind his mahogany fortification.

"Howdy, Wolf," Curly made a futile attempt at one of his friendly grins.

Old Niles Justin, over against his post, groaned aloud. Bloch had sure put the showdown up to Wolf. But he was standing there with his right fist shoved down in his pants' pocket, when it should have been fumbling at his left vest pocket right above his gun.

"I told yuh that—"

"That you were coming at me smoking, on sight. Well—start smoking!" Curly Bloch leaned forward, tense, and Wolf went for his gun.

Crack! Curly had jerked his right hand from his pants' pocket. His little automatic had spit a bullet through Wolf Gault's left forearm as he made his cross draw.

Wolf's heavy gun roared harmlessly, jetting its slug through the door. Another sharp crack, as Curly drilled Wolf high up on the right shoulder. Then came a second roaring of a heavy gun.

Old Niles Justin scrambled to his

feet. His chair had been kicked from under him. Close beside Justin, one of Wolf Gault's followers was twisting and crumpling to the floor, a heavy bullet through his thigh. Niles booted a drawn gun from the falling man's hand, and wheeled with his own gun ready. Then he stopped, staring, his mouth agape.

Curly Bloch was leaning lazily against the bar once more. His right hand had slipped back into his pants' pocket, while in his left was his new six-gun, swinging back and forth, threatening the remains of the crowd.

That last roar had come from Bloch's big six-gun. He had gone for it back-handed, with his left, and dropped the man, who was planning to put Niles out of business.

Wolf, himself, was still on his feet. A .32 bullet won't floor a big husky man. His right arm hung useless at his side; his gun was on the floor. His left hand was clapped over the hole in his

right shoulder.

Old Niles Justin hitched his belt a bit higher. He high-stepped toward Wolf, like a bantam rooster.

"Well, Wolf, looks as how yuh started smokin' once too often. An' no more pottin' at us from th' brush. Understand? 'Cause we got up-to-date artillery, what shoots right or left, back-'ards or for'ards."

Gault began backing toward the side door. Justin, now satisfied that Wolf Gault's nerve was gone, let out a yell, slipped his gun and fired through the floor. Wolf dove out the door.

"Come on, Niles. Wolf ain't got no hankerin' no more. Curly's done busted his ideas right outta his head."

"Eh-heh, Grady. Just a minute. I want Curly to write a letter for me an' order me one of them there pocket pistols like his'n. Danged thing might come in handy some time. 'Cause I'm gettin' 'long in years, gettin' kinda slow on th' draw."

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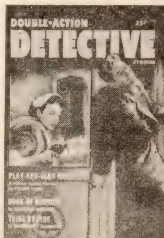
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KIT CARSON REMEMBERS

by Harold Gluck

In our previous issue, Mr. Gluck had Kit Carson tell about his early life and adventures. If you did not read that part of Kit's life, it will not hinder you in your enjoyment of what is to come; this section of Kit Carson's life and further adventures is independent of the previous material. Kit, himself, is doing the talking.

IN THE FALL of 1831 I joined the party under Fitzpatrick bound for the Rocky Mountains on a trapping expedition. We traveled north till we struck the Platte River and then journeyed up the Sweetwater, a branch of the Platte. We trapped to the head of the Sweetwater, then on to Green River, and then to Jackson's Hole, on a fork of the Columbia River, and from there upon to the head of Salmon River. There we came upon the camp of a part of our band that we had been hunting for, and then went into winter quarters on the head of Salmon River. During the winter we lost four or five men who were out hunting for buffalo. They were killed by the Blackfoot Indians.

In April, 1832, we commenced our hunt again. We trapped back on to Bear River, the principal stream that empties into Great Salt Lake, then on to the Green River, where we found a party of trappers in charge of Mr. Sinclair. They had left Taos shortly after we had, and had wintered on Little Bear River, a branch of Green. They told me that Captain Gaunt was in the New Park, and that he had wintered near the Laramie. Four of us left our party and struck out in search of him, and in ten days found him and his party at the New Park.

We remained in the Park trapping

for some time, and then moved through the plains of the Laramie and on to the south fork of the Platte, then to the Arkansas. On our arrival on the Arkansas, Gaunt took the beaver we had caught to Taos. Meanwhile, the party remained on the Arkansas, trapping. The beaver was disposed of, the necessities for our camp were purchased, and in the course of two months Gaunt rejoined us. We trapped on the waters of the Arkansas until the rivers began to freeze, and then went into winter quarters on the main stream. During the winter we passed a pleasant time. The snow was very deep and we had no difficulty in procuring as much buffalo meat as we required.

In January, 1833, a party of men who had been out hunting returned about dark. Their horses were very poor, having been fed during the winter on cottonwood bark, and they turned them out to gather such nourishment as they could find. That night a party of about fifty Crow Indians came to our camp and stole nine of the horses that were loose. In the morning we discovered sign of the Indians and twelve of us took the trail and traveled about forty miles. It was getting late. Our animals were fatigued for the snow was deep, and the passing of many herds of buffaloes during the day caused us a great deal of difficulty in keeping the trail. At length we saw a grove of timber at a distance of two or three miles. Taking into consideration the condition of our animals, we

concluded to make for it and camp for the night. On our arrival, however, we saw fires about four miles ahead of us. We tied our animals to trees, and as soon as it became dark, took a circuitous route for the Indian camp.

We planned to come upon the Indians from the direction in which they were traveling. It took us some time to get close enough to the camp to discover their strength, as we had to crawl and use all the means that we were aware of to elude detection. After maneuvering in this direction for some time, we came within about one hundred yards of their camp. The Indians were in two forts of about equal strength. They were dancing and singing, and passing the night jovially in honor of their robbery of the whites. We spied our horses, which were tied near the entrance of one of the forts. Let come what would, we were bound to get them. We remained concealed in the brush, suffering severely from the cold, until the Indians laid down to sleep.

WHEN WE thought they were all asleep, six of us crawled towards our animals, the rest remaining where they were as a reserve for us to fall back on in case we did not meet with success. We hid behind logs and crawled silently towards the fort, the snow being of great service to us for when crawling we were not liable to make any noise. We finally reached the horses, cut the ropes, and by throwing snowballs at them drove them to where our reserve was stationed. We then held a council, taking the views of each in regard to what had best be done. Some were in favor of retiring; having recovered their property and received no damage, they were willing to return to camp. Not so with those that had lost no animals; they wanted satisfaction for the trouble and hardships they had gone through while in pursuit of the thieves. Myself and two others were the only ones that had not lost horses and we were determined to have satisfaction, let the consequences

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be ever so fatal. The peace party could not get a convert over to their side. Seeing us so determined to fight (there is always a brotherly affection existing among trappers and the side of danger is always their choice), it was not long before all agreed to join us in our perilous enterprise.



We started the horses that had been retaken to the place where we had tied our other animals, with three of our men acting as an escort. We then marched directly for the fort from which we had taken our horses. When we were within a few paces of it, a dog discovered us and began to bark. The Indians were alarmed and commenced to get up, when we opened a deadly fire, each ball taking its victim. We killed nearly every Indian in the fort. The few that remained were wounded and made their escape to the other fort, whose inmates commenced firing on us, but without any effect, since we kept concealed behind trees, firing only when we were sure of our object.

It was now near day, and the Indians could see our force, which was so weak they concluded to charge on us. We received them calmly, and when they got very close fired on them, killing five, and the balance returned to their fort. After some deliberation among themselves, they finally made another attempt, which met with greater success. We had to retreat, but there was much timber in the vicinity, and we had but little difficulty in making our camp, where, being reinforced by the three men with the horses, we awaited the approach of the enemy. Since they did not attack us, we started for our main camp and arrived there in the evening. During our pursuit of

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the lost animals we suffered considerably, but in the success of recovering our horses and sending many a red-skin to his long home, our sufferings were soon forgotten. We remained in our camp without any further molestation until spring, when we started for Laramie River on another trapping expedition.

Before our departure, we cached what beaver we had on hand, some four hundred pounds. When we arrived on the south fork of the Platte, two of our men deserted, taking with them three of our best animals. We suspected their design, and Gaunt sent myself and another man in pursuit. They had a day start and we could not overtake them. When we arrived at our old camp, we discovered that they had raised the beaver and taken it down the Arkansas in a canoe which we had made during the winter for the purpose of crossing the river. The men and the beaver we never heard of again. I presume they were killed by the Indians. They deserved such a fate for their dishonesty. We recovered the stolen animals and considered ourselves fortunate, as they were of much more service to us than men that we could never trust again.

WE TOOK possession of one of the buildings that had been built during the winter and made the necessary preparations for our defense, not having the remotest idea how long we should have to remain. Being by ourselves we never ventured very far from our fort, unless for the purpose of procuring meat. We kept our horses picketed near, and at night slept in the house, always keeping a good lookout so that we might not be surprised when unprepared. We were here about a month when Mr. Blackwell, Gaunt's partner, arrived from the States, accompanied by ten or fifteen men. Shortly after their arrival four trappers of Gaunt's party arrived. They had

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been sent to find us and learn whether
we were dead or alive, the former being
the general belief.

We remained only a few days after
the arrival of the trappers. They stat-
ed that Gaunt's camp was in the Balla
Salado, the headwaters of the South
Fork of the Platte. While we were eat-
ing breakfast on the fourth day of our
march, we discovered a party of In-
dians trying to steal our horses. Sus-
pecting no danger, we had turned them
out to graze, some hobbled and some
loose. As soon as we perceived the In-
dians we made for them. One Indian
was killed, and the rest ran away. They
stole only one horse from us, one of
the Indians having been lucky enough
to mount one of the loose horses and
make his escape.

We traveled about fifty miles that
day and thought that we had got clear
of the Indians. We camped on a beauti-
ful stream, one of the tributaries of the
Arkansas. During the night we staked
our best animals. We had a very watch-
ful dog with us and during the night he
kept barking continually. We were
aware of the Indians being close and
kept good watch. In the morning my-
self and three others proposed to go to
a fork of the river that we knew of. It
was not far, and we wished to visit it to
look for beaver sign. If they were good
we intended to trap the stream; if not,
to proceed on our journey.

About an hour after we left, a large
party of Indians charged the camp,
running off all the loose animals. Four
of our men immediately mounted four
of our best animals and followed them.
In a short time they overtook the In-
dians and recaptured all of the ani-
mals. One of the men was wounded in
the affray, and one Indian was killed.

The route which we had to follow
to reach the fork led over a mountain,
that was difficult to pass. After some
trouble, we crossed it and arrived at
our destination, but found no beaver

[Turn To Page 92]

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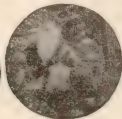
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sign. On our return we took a different route from that by which we had come. As we got around the mountain and were near our former trail, I saw in the distance four Indians. I proposed to charge them. All were willing, and we started for them, but when we got near we found we had caught a tar-tar. There were upwards of sixty Indians in the band. They had surrounded us and our only chance to save our lives was by instant flight. We fled, the Indians firing on us from all directions. We ran the gauntlet for about two hundred yards, the Indians being often as close to us as twenty yards. We dared not fire, not knowing what moment our horses might be shot under us, and the idea of finding oneself left afoot with his gun unloaded, was enough to make any man retain the shot in his gun. We finally made our escape and rejoined the party at the camp. One of our men was severely wounded, this being the only damage we received.

ON OUR arrival at camp we were informed of what had transpired during our absence. It was then easy enough to account for the Indians having followed us. They saw us leave camp and as they had the misfortune to lose the animals they had stolen, they intended to have our scalps. They made a very good attempt, but, thank God! failed.

We built a fort and remained encamped for the night, as we could not move until the wounded men were properly cared for. In the morning we made a litter to carry one of them—the other could ride horseback—and then pursued our course and in four days' march we found Gaunt. We remained at his camp until our wounded men recovered, and then started for the Old Park. We found beaver scarce, so many trappers having been there before us.

I and two others concluded to leave the party and hunt on our own hook.

We trapped nearly all the streams within the mountains, keeping away from the plains from fear of danger. We had very good luck, and having caught a great amount of beaver we started for Taos to dispose of it and have the pleasure of spending the money that had caused us so much danger and hardship to earn. We arrived at Taos in October, 1833, here we disposed of our beaver for a good sum, and everything of mountain life was forgotten for the time.

In Taos, I met Captain Lee of the U. S. A., who was a partner of Bent and St. Vrain and had purchased goods to trade with the trappers. I joined him, and in that latter part of October we started for the mountains to find them. We followed the Spanish Trail that leads to California till we struck Green River, and crossed from Green to the Winty, one of its tributaries, where we found Mr. Robidoux. He had a party of some twenty men that were

trapping and trading.

The snow was commencing to fall and we concluded to go into winter quarters. We found a place at the mouth of the Winty that answered every purpose. During the winter a California Indian of Mr. Robidoux's party ran off with six animals, some of them being worth two hundred dollars per head. Robidoux came to me and requested that I should pursue him. I spoke to Captain Lee and he informed me that I might use my pleasure. There was a Utah village close by, and I got one of the Indians to accompany me. We were furnished with two fine animals and took the trail of the runaway, who had gone down the river, his object being to reach California.

AFTER traveling about one hundred miles the animal of the Indian gave out and he would not accompany me any farther. I was determined not to give up the chase and continued the

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pursuit and in thirty miles overtook the Indian with the horses. Seeing me by myself, he showed fight and I was under the necessity of killing him. I recovered the horses, and returned to our camp, arriving in a few days without any further trouble.

Some trappers came to our camp and informed us that Fitzpatrick and Bridger were encamped on the Snake River. In March, 1834, we struck out for the purpose of finding their camp, and in fifteen days succeeded. Captain Lee sold his goods to Fitzpatrick and agreed to accept his pay in beaver. Lee then started for Taos, and I joined Fitzpatrick and remained with him one month. He had a great many men in his employ, and I thought it best to take three of them and go on a hunt by ourselves. We passed the summer trapping on the head of the Laramie and its tributaries, keeping to the mountains, our party being too weak to venture on the plains.



One evening, when we were en route to rejoin Bridger's party, after I had selected the camp for the night, I gave my horse to one of the men and started on foot to kill something for supper, not having a particle of anything eatable on hand. I had gone about a mile when I discovered some elk on the side of a ridge. I shot one and immediately after the discharge of my gun I heard a noise in my rear. I turned around and saw two very large grizzly bears making for me. My gun was unloaded and I could not possibly reload it in time to fire. There were some trees at a short distance, and I made for them, the bears after me. As I got to one of them, I had to drop my gun, and make all haste to ascend it. I got

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up some ten or fifteen feet, where I had to remain till the bears found it convenient to leave. One remained but a short while, the other stayed for some time and with his paws nearly uprooted the small aspen trees that grew around the tree which I had ascended. He made several attempts at the tree in which I was perched, but as he could do no damage, he finally concluded to leave. I was heartily pleased at this, never having been so badly scared in my life. I remained in the



tree for some time longer, and when I considered the bears far enough off, I descended and made for my camp as rapidly as possible. It was dark when I arrived and I could not send for the elk which I had killed, so we had to pass the night without anything to eat. During the night we trapped some beaver, so we had something for breakfast.

We remained in this place some ten or fifteen days, when Bridger appeared, on his way to the summer rendezvous. We joined him and went to Green River, the place of the rendezvous, where two camps were established. I think there were two hundred trappers encamped, awaiting the arrival of supplies from St. Louis. We had to dispose of our beaver to procure the necessities of life. Coffee and sugar were two dollars a pint, powder the same, lead one dollar a bar, and common blankets from fifteen to twenty-five dollars apiece.

We remained in the rendezvous during the month of August, 1834. In September, camp was broken up and we divided into parties of convenient size and started on our fall hunt. The party of which I was a member con-

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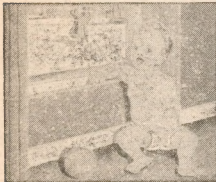
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sisted of fifty men. We set out for the country of the Blackfoot Indians, on the headwaters of the Missouri. We made a very poor hunt as the Indians were very troublesome. Five of our men were killed. A trapper could hardly go a mile from camp without being fired upon. As we found that we could do but little in this country, we started for winter quarters.

IN NOVEMBER we got to the Big Snake River, where we again encamped. Nothing of moment transpired till February, 1835, when the Blackfeet came and stole eighteen of our horses. Twelve of us followed them about fifty miles before we caught up with them. They had traveled as far as they could, being delayed by the snow. In endeavoring to get the horses we fired some shots at them but could not approach near enough to do any great damage. They had snowshoes, we had none; they could travel over the snow without difficulty, while we would sink in it up to our waists.

The horses were on the side of a hill where there was but little snow, and our only object was now to get them. We asked for a parley and the Indians agreed. One man from each side was to proceed half of the distance that separated us and have a talk. This was done, and we talked for some time, the Indians saying that they thought we were Snake Indians and that they did not want to steal from the Whites. We replied that if they were friendly they would lay down their arms and have a friendly talk and smoke with us. They agreed to do this, and each party left one man to guard the arms. We then met at the place where the first two men were talking, and talked and smoked.

The Indians were thirty strong. They sent for our horses, but returned with only five of the worst and said they would not give up any more. We broke for our arms and they for theirs, and the fight commenced. A man named

Markhead and I were in the advance, and overtook two Indians who had remained in the rear of their party, concealed behind two trees. I approached one, and Markhead the other. Markhead was not paying sufficient attention to his Indian who, I noticed, raised his gun to fire. I forgot entirely the danger in which I myself was and neglected my Indian for Markhead's opponent. As the latter was about to fire on Markhead, I raised my gun and took sight. He saw me and endeavored to conceal himself, but he was too late. I fired and he fell. The moment I fired I remembered the Indian that I was after. I looked and saw him sighting for my breast. As I could not load in time, I commenced dodging about as well as I could. He fired, and the ball grazed my neck and passed through my shoulder.

We then drew off for about a mile and encamped for the night. It was very cold and we could not make any fires for fear the Indians might approach and fire on us. We had no covering but our saddle blankets, and I passed a miserable night from the pain of the wound, it having bled freely and the blood having frozen. In the morning we found that the Indians were in the same place. We were not strong enough to attack them, so we started for camp. On our arrival Bridger took thirty men and started for the place where we had left the Indians, but when he got there they had gone to the plains. So we only recovered the five stolen animals which they had given us.

In a few days we set out on our spring hunt. We trapped the waters of the Snake and the Green Rivers, made a very good hunt, and then went into summer quarters on Green River. Shortly after we reached the rendezvous our equipment arrived. We disposed of our beaver to the traders that came up with it, remaining in summer quarters till September, 1835.

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